C O N T E N T S

Prologue

Chapter 1: There's No Freaking Way I'm Not the Fiancée!?

Chapter 2: There's No Freaking Way We Can Blow Up Queen Rose! (※Thank God We Can't!)

Chapter 3: There's No Freaking Way Three People Can Date! (※It Actually Worked!)

Chapter 4: There's No Way Everything Can Work Out Perfectly, Right?

Epilogue

Prologue

Oh hey there, I'm totally an extrovert now! (laugh)

Ahh, sorry about that. Just been living my completely worry-free life over here (laugh)

Man, life is just so fun! (laugh)

Just recently, I managed to successfully erase my own past—and now I, Amaori Renako, have finally ascended to become the extrovert among extroverts, Grand Amaori Renako!

Now I don't even need that daily ritual where I stand in front of the mirror every morning and tell myself "I'm an extrovert...!" anymore.

The whole thing with my sister got resolved without a hitch too, and life is just way too perfect in every way.

The sun's really bright again today.

The sun...? Oh wait, you mean my radiant smile? (laugh)

Just kidding! (explosive laugh)

And so—

Spread out before me was this vast meadow of love and hope.

On this day, a Saturday at the end of November, lively voices were echoing through Ashigaya High, the school I attend. The so-called "Ashigaya Festival." In other words, Ashigaya High's cultural festival had begun. Tons of visitors from the surrounding area had come too, creating a completely different scene than usual.

With my sister's problems resolved, extrovert me had spent these past two weeks happily preparing for the cultural festival with my classmates. Who would've thought that me—a shut-in during middle school—would be helping out with cultural festival prep... People really can change when they put their minds to it... Back then, I hated people so much...

No! That past never happened anymore!

I was popular all through middle school!

I won the middle school beauty contest three years in a row. Everyone treated me like a princess wherever I went, and I was friends with absolutely everyone in school! I got confessed to every day, my shoe locker was always stuffed with love letters, and all the teachers totally adored me—those were the most amazing three years of my life!

Wait... no. Making your past "never happen" doesn't mean convincing yourself that convenient delusions are the truth... That's a mental illness...

Just as I was about to come back to my senses in the hallway in front of the classroom, I heard a shrill "Kyaa!!" from nearby.

I looked over. Standing there were my biggest Amaori Renako fangirls and absolute best friends who always shower me with attention—Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san.

"Amaori-san, you look so adorable!"

"Whoooa, I totally thought cosplay would suit you perfectly, and it totally does! Wow, I'm so happy! I'm so happy I get to see cute Amaori-san!"

Bathed in their sparkling gazes, I smiled sweetly.

"Ah, ahahaha. Really? Thanks ☆"

That's right. I was cosplaying on campus.

Not the hardcore cosplay stuff I did with Kaho-chan before though—this was just store-bought merchandise. A one-piece style nurse outfit. The kind of cosplay design you don't really see much these days. Pink colored. Plus the skirt was way shorter than my usual school uniform, and while I was terrified about showing my legs, everyone already knew how thick they were anyway, so I just had to steel myself...

White tights would hide everything. Tights are always a high school girl's seatbelt...

By the way, the nurse outfit had bloodstains splattered here and there, giving off this really ominous vibe. If a nurse like this showed up for a health screening, everyone would definitely leave ☆1 reviews saying "way too scary" on the hospital's review site.

And for good reason—Class 1-A's project was a haunted house.

A haunted house for the cultural festival! If I were allergic to extroverts, I'd probably be sneezing nonstop for the next 80 years, but hey! I'm an extrovert! So of course I'd totally do a haunted house for the cultural festival!

The idea came from Kaho-chan. Apparently she's been really into horror lately, and she came up with this backstory that twisted around existing urban legends. Her enthusiasm got the whole class fired up too. Before we knew it, our project was decided.

Something about a classroom rumored to be haunted by the ghost of a girl who got stabbed after a love triangle went wrong. I thought "Huh?" for a second there, but it's fiction. It better be fiction.

The prep was actually pretty fun, to be honest...

We covered the windows with aluminum foil to block the light, and wrapped black plastic bags around the fluorescent bulbs to create just enough safe lighting. Then we stacked up cardboard to make walls,

turning the classroom into a maze, and plastered tons of newspaper all over everything.

Slapping bright red handprints all over the newspaper really brought out that classic haunted house atmosphere. This alone was pretty scary.

Then volunteers brought in creepy dolls, mannequins, kokeshi dolls—basically any object that would look unsettling in dim lighting—and we scattered them around everywhere, resulting in the birth of this totally inconsistent East-meets-West mishmash haunted house.

It definitely felt like a cultural festival project, but having made it all from scratch, I felt pretty satisfied with the result. Now I was even fond of it. Ahh, our precious little haunted house... It's gonna be sad tearing it down after the festival ends... I want to keep having classes like this... Actually, no I don't.

Anyway, that's why I was cosplaying as a bloody nurse.

Though when I really think about it, having a nurse in a ghost-haunted classroom doesn't make much sense world-building wise either... Oh well! I won't sweat the details! I'm an extrovert after all! (prejudice)

"Honestly, I'm not really good with scary stuff, but just getting to see Amaori-san in cosplay made me think the haunted house was totally worth it..."

"I totally get that... The cultural festival is just too amazing... I wouldn't mind if every day was the cultural festival..."

"Ahaha. That's a little too much praise ☆"

Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san's compliments soaked right into my heart...

Even though it was store-bought cosplay, Kaho-chan had secretly tailored the Quintet's outfits, so they actually looked pretty good. And I'd learned some makeup tricks from Ajisai-san recently, so my repertoire had expanded a bit.

Maybe I really have become an extrovert...

Even now, standing at the haunted house reception in the hallway in front of the classroom, I don't really mind all the stares. Sure, people passing by do gawk at me, but I can totally handle it.

Well, I still get nervous when strangers talk to me, you know? But the fact that I'm only feeling nervousness—and it stops there—represents immeasurable progress for me. Amaori Renako has leveled up way too much... I might really turn into the sun...

Then I heard a trembling voice.

"Eh... eh, eh, wait. Hirano, Hasegawa... you know this lady...?"

There was a small girl wearing an unfamiliar school uniform. She was backing away like she was facing some huge dog, retreating three steps while looking at me with terrified eyes.

Hirano-san broke into a huge smile.

"Ehhhh!? Nishiyama, you don't know her!?"

Same with Hasegawa-san.

"Amaori-san teamed up with us during the sports tournament! And she'll chat with you if you talk to her! Right, Amaori-san!"

"U-uh, yeah ☆"

"Seriously...? Eh, you guys had a high school glow-up...? Why...? I don't understand at all... Why...??"

The girl called Nishiyama seemed to have completely lost her mind.

I immediately grasped the situation. Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san had invited a friend from another school to the cultural festival. And they were showing me off...!

Seeing this side of Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san for the first time, I felt such deep empathy. If I were in their position, I would've definitely done the exact same thing. Nothing's more fun than introverts flexing on other introverts... Wait, I'm an extrovert though...

Well, they're always hyping me up anyway. Since it's a special occasion, I decided to turn on the charm. This is also an extrovert's duty. An extrovert's noblesse oblige.

While acting adorably (or trying to look adorable), I gave an adorable (or trying to look adorable) greeting.

"I'm Amaori Renako. Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san are always taking such good care of me ☆"

"Hawaaaaaah...!?"

Nishiyama-san went even paler. And Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san's smiles grew deeper.

"After all, Amaori-san is one of Ashigaya High's top idol group, the Quintet!"

"She's friends with Oduka Mai-san and the most popular girl in class! Everyone treats her like a princess wherever she goes, she's friends with absolutely everyone in school, she gets confessed to every day, her shoe locker is always stuffed with love letters, and all the teachers totally adore her!"

That's way too much!!

What? Do extroverts have to just accept this kind of praise!? It's too heavy!

No, wait. I know what I'm supposed to say in situations like this.

Now's the time to unleash those words...!

Alright! I'm gonna do it! Because I'm an extrovert!

I made peace signs with both hands and gave my biggest smile.

"Ehh? Even if you praise me that much, all I can give you is a smile ☆"

"＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿"

Nishiyama-san.

Slowly started falling backward.

Eh!?

"N-Nishiyama!?"

"Ahhhhh she got hit with Amaori-san's smile at point-blank range!"

"What's happening!?"

"Sorry, Amaori-san! We're used to getting burned by the Quintet's light so we can still handle it! Well, actually our heart rates are pretty dangerous right now!"

"Nishiyama doesn't live in an environment where she talks to cute girls so this is a fatal blow! Sorry but we'll have to cut the greetings short and excuse ourselves! Sorry, Nishiyama! We three stooges alliance need to return to the world of darkness!"

Nishiyama-san was firmly grabbed by both arms by Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san and dragged away.

"What just happened..."

My mumble slipped out.

Well, I mean... I probably would've had a heart attack on the spot too if Ajisai-san had done the same thing to me when I first started high school...

But have I somehow reached the same heights as Ajisai-san...? I looked down at my own hands, trembling like a tragic monster who'd become too powerful.

No way, no way... That can't be right... This is probably just the cultural festival non-daily life buff...

You know how when you run into a classmate you usually see in uniform on a day off, and they've got their hair all stylish or whatever, you suddenly get all fluttery... It's that kind of thing... Yeah...

Even though I call myself an extrovert now, being told I'm on the same level as Ajisai-san makes me feel hesitant. Ajisai-san is an angel, after all...

"Rena-chan~"

Ah, an angel's voice!

I turned to see Ajisai-san, who'd just gone out on a flyer distribution mission to advertise our haunted house.

Of course, Ajisai-san was cosplaying too.

Ajisai-san's costume was a nun's habit.

"Ohh..."

Even though I'd seen it so many times already, and we'd even gotten changed together, I could still feel fresh excitement. Delicious sweets taste good no matter how many times you eat them...

Ajisai-san wore a black and white, monochrome outfit with a veil-like head covering (apparently called a wimple) and her hair done up in a big braid.

Since it was cosplay for a haunted house, the skirt was naturally short with deep slits cut into it. Her legs covered in white tights were blindingly radiant, and the absolute territory that occasionally peeked out would definitely charm people of all ages and genders.

It reminded me of when we played ping-pong at that hot spring inn we went to together... Even though she's a nun, she looks like the physical embodiment of human worldly desires... No! I don't look at Ajisai-san that way!

This is dangerous. I almost looked. That was a close one. If the skirt had been even one millimeter shorter, who knows what would've happened. Thank god I'm an extrovert. (mysterious)

"Oh, Ajisai-san, that was quick."

"Yeah. Everyone took the flyers. They were all such nice people, I'm so glad."

Ajisai-san gave a relieved smile. Well of course—when faced with Ajisai-san, even bad people can't stay bad. Even habitual pickpockets would break down in tears and reform.

"But still..."

"?"

As Ajisai-san tilted her head, I mumbled with heated cheeks.

"Well... Ajisai-san, your nun outfit suits you so perfectly, it's so cute..."

I muttered my praise of Ajisai-san while looking away like a total introvert.

Come on! I worked up the courage for that!

Ajisai-san had told me before that 'when you think something's cute, I want you to put it into words!' So I properly put it into words!

I'm amazing! Rena-chan is growing!

"Ehh?"

Ajisai-san softly relaxed her cheeks with a gentle expression.

Then she made peace signs with both hands and smiled the cutest smile in the world.

"Even if you suddenly praise me like that, all I can give you is a smile~"

Uwaaaa——

I lost the ability to speak from the overwhelming adorableness.

The real deal has completely different destructive power. It's a miracle I didn't get completely vaporized.

Thank god Nishiyama-san wasn't here. Humans aren't built to withstand an angel's smile head-on... She definitely would've turned into a pillar of salt...

No matter how used I am to getting burned by this smile, there's no way I can ever get used to it!

Before I knew it, reception shift change time had arrived. After switching with Ajisai-san, I decided to wander around campus still in my nurse outfit.

Alright, time to enjoy my first cultural festival as an extrovert! I psyched myself up.

But no good...!

It was obvious when I thought about it. My soul isn't shaped like an extrovert's. I can only act extroverted because everyone around me treats me like one and hypes me up—once I'm alone, I'm just plain old Amaori Renako...!

Even casually looking at the exhibits, I felt awkward.

Everyone around me was having fun with their friends, but I was alone... I was the only one all by myself in the world...

Less than five minutes after leaving Class 1-A, my mental state had already reverted back to my shut-in days.

In the end, without friends surrounding me, I can't do anything...!

I can't even line up at a food stall by myself to buy yakisoba. People's stares bother me. I feel like someone's pointing fingers at me from somewhere.

'Ugh, Amaori-san is all alone (laugh)' 'Even though she's in the Quintet!? (sneer)' 'So sad lol'

I can almost hear voices like that. Being part of a famous group is nothing but a debuff.

And on top of that, wearing such a flashy outfit... what am I even doing...!

That's right. I have my most beloved place: the rooftop. If I could just make it to the rooftop, I'd figure something out. I'd kill the remaining time there. Then I could return to Class 1-A like nothing happened.

Only when I'm with everyone from Class 1-A can I become an extrovert. Whether that actually counts as being an extrovert... I decided to ignore that doubt with all my might. I was gonna cry otherwise.

But no good...!

The stairs leading to the rooftop were blocked off by a massive pile of desks and chairs taken from classrooms.

Uwaaaan!!

I panicked internally. Why would they do this?! There are people who can't survive without the rooftop! Just because it's usually locked off to prevent falls! This is so unfair!

If I had the cuteness to turn around here, go back the way I came, return to Ajisai-san who was probably at Class 1-A's reception, and sweetly ask 'I didn't really enjoy going around the cultural festival alone... can I stay with you?', I could've lived a little more skillfully.

Sadly, my half-baked pride got in the way...

At this rate, I might become some intermediate life form between extrovert and introvert, doomed to wander the school space forever... Such a tragic fate...

If only there was someone I knew around...

I should've tried harder to make friends.

There are two types in the Quintet.

The side like Ajisai-san, Kaho-chan, and Mai who really have lots of friends and broad social circles. And the side like Satsuki-san who only talks to specific individuals.

I was the latter type.

More accurately, I was the type who could piggyback on popular kids' friendships and talk when in groups, but knowing full well I couldn't maintain conversation one-on-one, I kept running away.

A third type...!

I'd gotten complacent sitting pretty in my Quintet position.

Life always has these moments where you have to pay for what you've been running from... Sure, I see kids I've chatted with a few times when walking down the halls... But there's no way I could just approach them and honestly say 'I'm bored, want to go around together?'...

What should I do? Maybe I should hang a sign around my neck that says 'Pitiful woman who couldn't become an extrovert but got an extrovert position anyway and developed an inflated ego.' Then maybe someone would talk to me. Hehehe...

Maybe I should just go home!

Just as I was about to be crushed by defeat while walking down the hallway, a saving voice rained down on me.

"Ah! Oneesan-senpai!"

That moderately bratty, high-pitched voice...!

"Seira-san!"

My face lit up as I turned around. An acquaintance... An acquaintance...!

"I was looking for you! But... what's with that creepy smile?"

"It's nothing! Wow, what a coincidence running into you here!"

Seira-san wasn't solo—she was in a party.

"Onee-chan..."

A pitying gaze stabbed at my skin.

"Ugh, little sister...!"

That's right, she'd originally said she was coming to visit. She saw me at a bad moment.

Seira-san in her school uniform was with my sister and Minato-san.

"Onee-san. Thank you for your help the other day."

"Oh, no, not at all..."

Minato-san politely bowed to me.

Ever since that incident when I barged into the Nashiji house,
Minato-san seemed to show me proper respect. This kid is a good kid...

The not-so-good kids flanked me.

"We came all the way to visit onee-chan's high school... so why are you alone?"

I don't like those pointed remarks, little sis...

But with my sister, I could at least manage some back talk. I wagged my finger.

"I wanted to take my time and leisurely go around the cultural festival at my own pace without anyone bothering me. You wouldn't understand that, would you, little sister? This level of conversation (laugh)"

"Oh, I see. Well then, take your time."

"That said! This is all three of your first times at Ashigaya High, right!? Just for today, I'll specially give you a tour!"

I stepped in front of my sister as she was about to turn around and puffed out my chest.

Can't be helped! These inexperienced middle schoolers are such a handful!

"That's not what we care about though~"

Seira-san clung to my arm while stretching out her words in a sweet voice.

"Hey, beautiful and lovely oneesan-senpai~ Don't you have something you want to do for me~?"

"Eh? Hehehe, come on, even if you praise me that much, all I can give you is a smile~?"

"Don't get all pleased with yourself! Idiot! Dummy!"

This is bad. I seem to have chosen the wrong option. My smile doesn't work on this girl...!?

But it's my smile though...!

"She came to meet Mai-senpai," my sister casually threw me a lifeline.

But then immediately looked away.

"I told her it would be harsh to ask onee-chan to introduce them, given her current situation..."

"That's not it!"

Right, these guys saw that engagement announcement with Lucie-chan the other day and think Mai rejected me. Even though I screamed so much about how it was all a misunderstanding!

Seira-san changed her attitude from before and put on a cute smile along with a honey-sweet voice.

"But but~ it's a promise, right~? Please introduce me to Oduka-senpai soon ♡"

"I'd love to do that if I could, but—"

"But!?"

Onigawara Seira snapped at the end of my sentence. She's overflowing with aggression. Having "oni" in her surname fits perfectly...

"Mai's not at school today."

"Haaah!?"

Yeah, poor thing—Mai's schedule for the cultural festival day had been filled with work for months already.

She did participate in the haunted house prep several times and seemed to enjoy it. But since we knew she couldn't come on the actual day, we all consoled ourselves by saying 'We want to go around together next year~.'

By the way, Satsuki-san is also absent. She's apparently out sick, but if she later said 'I wasn't interested so I didn't go,' well, that would be so very Satsuki-san.

Seira-san deflated like she'd had her fangs pulled.

"Even though I came all this way~..."

"Well well, Seira. Can't be helped, so let's just go around normally? We can't come to a high school cultural festival that many times."

Minato-san patted her shoulder.

"Sigh~... I guess we should~..."

"Well then onee-chan, take us somewhere that looks interesting."

My sister pointed at me decisively.

That's pretty high-handed language toward me, someone worshipped as part of Ashigaya's Quintet, but if this gets me out of being alone, it's a small price to pay.

"Well then, there's this haunted house I'd recommend."

And so I returned to Class 1-A with three middle schoolers in tow.

"Come to think of it, onee-san's nurse cosplay is really cute."

"Oh, really? Thanks!"

She's praising me... Minato-san is such a good kid...

"You have such a great figure, you really look like Haruna's onee-chan."

Good kid! So cute! I want to give her allowance!

My sister immediately waved her hand with a straight face.

"Oh, it's fine, it's fine, Minato. You don't need to give her treats."

"You!"

What a brat. Can I still exchange sisters at this point!?

While waiting in front of the classroom.

"Uwaaaaaaaaah!"

Seira-san came tumbling out of the haunted house exit while screaming.

Seira-san pressed her back against the hallway wall and clutched her chest.

"Wh-wh-wh-what was that!?"

Then immediately, loud laughter echoed.

"Ahahaha! A customer who gets that scared is such a good guest, nya!"

The girl who appeared from inside the haunted house had a knife stuck in her stomach.

It was Kaho-chan. She'd been stationed in the haunted house all day playing the role of the scarer.

She was wearing a sailor uniform different from Ashigaya High's that she'd ordered online and damaged to give off the atmosphere of a Showa-era schoolgirl. That alone would just be cute, but around the knife stabbed in her stomach was all bloody and splattered. Running into her suddenly in the dark would be pretty scary.

She'd also let down her usually tied-up hair and covered one eye with her bangs, which added to the ghostly look.

According to the setting, she's the ghost of a girl who got stabbed after cheating in a love triangle. The oddly realistic setting is probably Kaho-chan's particular attention to detail.

I feel like I'm taking some damage from this too... but oh well.

A bit behind Seira-san, my sister and Minato-san also came out.

"Wow, high school cultural festivals are amazing!"

"Yeah, that was pretty thrilling. Making it all by hand is incredible."

The two of them were also startled when they saw Kaho-chan.

"Ehhhh...? So realistic..."

"They go this far...?"

Well, that's understandable... After all, this is ghost cosplay produced by super popular cosplayer Nagipo. There's no cutting corners whatsoever. (Apparently)

That said, under the sunlight, her pretty girl power definitely wins out. Kaho-chan smiled brightly and cheerfully gave a thumbs up.

"Well, it's only the customers' screams and wails that bring me back to life, after all."

Kaho-chan looked genuinely happy. A born entertainer...

"Just earlier I made a cocky couple who came in burst into tears too."

"That's so cruel!"

"Ahaha. Just kidding, just kidding."

Kaho-chan smiled like a kitten with narrowed eyes. Is she really though!?

Ajisai-san, who'd been at reception, also came over.

"Everyone coming out is surprised, but they all look like they're having fun. The haunted house is a huge success."

"Yup!"

Kaho-chan grinned and thrust out a peace sign. So cute.

Oh, that's right.

"Seira-san, Minato-san. These two are—"

I decided to introduce Kaho-chan and Ajisai-san to the middle schoolers. (Of course, Seira-san and Kaho-chan already knew each other)

These two had helped me with my sister's truancy issue. Including Mai and Satsuki-san who weren't here, it wasn't unrelated to them. Especially for Minato-san.

"Ah... so that's how it was."

Minato-san bowed deeply, just like she had with me.

"Thank you so much for your help back then. I really, truly appreciate it."

"Don't mention it."

Ajisai-san waved both hands and smiled as their representative.

"I'm glad we can see all three of you getting along again like this."

I'd told the Quintet members about the general situation. I thought they had a right to know, since they'd helped me out so much.

That my sister's truancy was caused by fighting with Minato-san. That Minato-san's older sister was my former classmate who didn't get along with me. But Minato-san loved and believed in her sister, which made things complicated. And that Seira-san had been working hard to get the two of them to make up. That kind of thing.

I left out details like Komachi becoming truant or me being bullied by Komachi, and gave them an explanation along those lines.

"We really caused you so much trouble. Thank you."

My sister also bowed. Both Ajisai-san and Kaho-chan casually accepted the apology with 'don't worry about it.'

Watching that scene, I somehow felt relieved.

This really was the end of my sister's situation. That's how it felt.

My eyes met Ajisai-san's. Ajisai-san moved her lips slightly without making a sound.

'I'm glad it worked out.'

I felt like she was saying that to me.

I got a little embarrassed and scratched my cheek.

But, well, yeah.

It was a strange feeling.

In the hallway of my high school, people who shouldn't be there were all gathered together.

Seira-san looking bewildered after being teased by Kaho-chan. Minato-san smiling while feeling grateful. My sister blushing age-appropriately while being looked after by Ajisai-san.

Looking at everyone like that, I thought:

I'm glad.

Because right now, I feel so happy.

And so, my first high school cultural festival came to an end.

When cleanup time came and we had to tear down all the cardboard we'd worked so hard to build... that was just as fun as making it had been.

"I'm home~"

I came back from the cultural festival after-party and leaned against the living room sofa still in my uniform.

Phew... I totally exhausted my communication skills today... My facial muscles won't even move anymore...

But it was fun...

For the after-party, we went to an okonomiyaki restaurant with everyone from class.

Class president Shimizu-kun and Kaho-chan had acted as organizers and reserved the place ahead of time. Just by answering Kaho-chan's invitation of 'You're coming, right?' with 'I'll be there!' I got to join the after-party. Just having reliable friends makes life such easy mode...

In front of my classmates, I can put on my extrovert mask... I got to recover lots of extrovert power... Well, I am an extro(abbreviated) though...

After lying on the sofa scrolling through my phone for a while, I noticed there was a cake box on the dining table.

I drifted over and peeked inside. And it was my favorite chocolate cake from my favorite cake shop too.

"Mom, where'd this come from?"

I called out to my mom who was doing dishes in the kitchen.

Someone's birthday? Or an anniversary?

"Oh, Haruna bought that."

"Haruna did...?"

My sister who got home first was currently taking a bath.

Just then, she came out. She appeared in the living room with a bath towel wrapped around her body.

"Oh, onee-chan, welcome home."

"I'm back. Thanks for coming to visit today."

"No no. Thank you for having us. I got to meet Ajisai-senpai and Kaho-senpai too."

"So what's with this cake?"

My sister was vigorously rubbing her hair with the towel on her head.

"Just eat it?"

"Eh?"

"That's the kind you like, right?"

"Um..."

I stared back at Haruna with my mouth hanging open.

"You mean it's for me?"

"Well, yeah."

"Why???"

At my perfectly reasonable question, my sister acted like she was playing dumb.

"No reason. It just happened."

It just happened...!?

"The sister who usually wants to split convenience store purchases down to the penny, and it 'just happened'...? Eh, what's going on!? You're saying there was no intention whatsoever in the process of going to a cake shop and ordering my favorite chocolate cake!?"

"You're so loud! If you don't want it, that's fine! I'll throw it away!"

"No no, I'll eat it, I'll eat it!"

I protected the cake box from my glaring sister. Why 'I'll throw it away' instead of 'I'll eat it then'? That logic is too extreme...

"I just want to understand the intention..."

My sister pointed at me as I sneakily grabbed a fork from the kitchen.

"There are lots of things in the world we don't understand, but people somehow live without understanding them. Onee-chan doesn't know why a fork is called a 'fork' either, right?"

"The etymology of 'fork' comes from the Latin 'furca,' meaning rake or a stick split in two. One theory says the prototype was discovered in 6000-year-old ruins in Turkey—"

"Shut up and eat! Nerd!"

I just showed off some knowledge I'd read during my hobby of Wikipedia browsing, but got hit with terrible abuse.

Feeling crushed, I sat down and mechanically brought cake to my mouth.

"Um... it's delicious."

"Good for you."

"But what was the real intention... The only reason I can think of for Haruna to buy me cake is that she wanted to thank me somehow after that recent incident got resolved, but since Haruna isn't honest, she decided to casually buy cake instead..."

"Seriously shut up and eat. I'll kill you."

My sister's eyes were too scary, so I seriously decided to shut up.

Saying 'I'll kill you' in front of our parents is way too much. Sure enough, my sister got scolded by mom for her rough language. Of course she did.

Still, even eating in silence, the cake was delicious.

Hmm... What a nice day.

The cultural festival was fun, and the after-party was fun too.

Coming home to find my favorite cake waiting for me.

School life is going smoothly, and my relationship with my girlfriend is good too.

I wonder... Lately I feel like my luck has been way too much on the upswing.

They say the goddess of fortune smiles on people who work hard. There are definitely periods when everything you do goes well. Luck is invisible but it definitely exists. Reading the flow is the trick to living life skillfully.

That's right, let me check my horoscope. Maybe it'll say something like 'Buy a lottery ticket right now.'

I input my birthdate on some random site and look at the results. So exciting.

'Super Bad Luck' appeared.

Wait.

Love Luck: Total defeat. Nothing will go right for you this week. Try keeping a low profile!

Study Luck: Collapse. Failure is the mother of success! No matter how many times you fall, get back up! Don't worry about it!

Friendship Luck: Plummeting. Are the kids you think are your friends really your friends? Start doubting people!

Life Luck: Extinction. Your life might seriously be in danger! You should buy a shelter right now!

What punchy content this turned out to be...

What kind of site is this? Is this some harassment-specialized fortune site called 'Miss Fortune!'? Let me try my sister's birthdate...

Normal results...

So that means my fortune is really terrible...?

"Ow!"

Just then, I bit down on something hard.

I cautiously explored my mouth with my tongue. It seemed to be a lump of sugar. Mixed into the cake...? I mean, that's totally impossible though...

The impossible was happening. I stared intently at the sugar lump I'd pulled out with my finger. Suddenly, I noticed there was a cut on my palm.

"Huh... did I cut myself without realizing...?"

I might have gotten hurt by cardboard or something during the cultural festival cleanup. Once I became aware of it, I felt like a throbbing pain was starting.

"Oh my..."

Mom, who was washing dishes in the kitchen, made a disappointed sound.

"Renako's rice bowl broke."

She held up the broken bowl to show me.

Eh...

"Wh-why...?"

"Who knows? Maybe there was a crack inside. Look, it's split perfectly in half."

Mom showed me the bowl that looked like it had been cut with a legendary sword and laughed, saying "I'll have to buy a new one."

I stared down at my half-eaten chocolate cake and fell silent.

...This isn't like a sign that bad things are going to happen, right?

I stayed looking down for a while...

But then! I looked up with a smile.

Ahaha! Just kidding!

Fortune? Bad luck? That's ridiculous! Luck is just probability fluctuations! Sometimes things swing up, sometimes down—that's totally normal. Getting depressed and saying 'my luck is bad' over stuff like that is just too foolish.

A flow? No way. (laugh)

There isn't one, right...

When I tried to grab my phone, it slipped right out of my palm. The phone unluckily fell right onto my pinky toe...

"Ngh!"

Sharp pain shot through me. A vital spot on the human body...!

While I was writhing in agony, someone came stomping into the living room.

It was Haruna in her pajamas, looking frantic.

"O-onee-chan!"

I looked up with tears in my eyes from the cold sweat, gritting my teeth.

"...?"

"Um, um, um!"

I wonder what this is. I can see déjà vu beyond the pain. Last time, I'm pretty sure after this my sister thrust her phone at me...

My sister thrust her phone at me.

"Did you see!? This!"

There was a big photo of Mai displayed on it.

"Eh, what!? Am I time-leaping!?"

"That's not it! This! Read it! The article!"

"O-okay..."

Pressured, I read through it.

It said:

'Oduka Mai's Second Engagement Announcement—'

Queen Rose representative model Oduka Mai announced that she is engaged once again. Oduka reported: "To all the fans who always warmly support me, and to all the related parties who have taken care of me, I have an important announcement to make. This is sudden news and I apologize for the personal matter, but I have become engaged to a woman I have been in a relationship with."

Regarding the previous engagement announcement, a correction was made stating it was misinformation.

"Eh!?"

No way... Eh...!?

W-wait, Mai!? You're kidding, right!?

This time for real... about me!?!?

When the fiancée problem erupted before.

"I might have to make you wait a little while until I figure something out... but please trust me, both of you."

That's what Mai told us.

So she must have worked really, really hard to win the engagement cancellation from her mother.

And as part of the deal, she publicly announced about me—

Light flashed before my eyes. A scene appeared in my head. Me surrounded by tons of reporters. Microphones thrust at me. Strobe lights flashing constantly, crowds demanding comments, bathed in envious stares from all directions. Like a modern-day Cinderella. This would be so troublesome! What's gonna happen to me now~!?

"Onee-chan! Look, here! Look!"

"Huh?"

My sister, who'd been shaking my shoulders, pointed further down in the article.

'The partner is a Japanese childhood friend from a family they've had close ties with since childhood'

Looking back at my sister, I shouted.

"I was Mai's childhood friend!?"

To me saying that, my sister replied:

"...Sorry, this was kicking you while you're down, wasn't it..."

"Eh!?"

She looked at me with pitying eyes, like she was feeling sorry for some delusional woman who couldn't accept that she'd been dumped ages ago.

...Eh!?!?

And then an even bigger shock.

This time the article included a photo of the partner's face.

I was about to be shocked to my very core.

That partner was—

"—Haaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

Koto Satsuki.

Her composed face seemed to be staring at me from the other side of the screen.

Chapter 1: There's No Freaking Way I'm Not the Fiancée!?

It was the day before Ashigaya High's cultural festival was set to begin.

Hanatori Hitoe sat cross-legged in front of the drum washing machine at the Oduka household, just staring blankly at the clothes getting tossed around inside.

"...Haah..."

Once every two minutes. Like a drum rotating at a predetermined speed, sighs escaped her.

Her eyes, which normally reflected sharp light like polished mirrors, drooped sleepily like those of a sleep-deprived cat.

This was a face she would never show in front of her master, Oduka Mai.

All of this was because... she just couldn't muster up any motivation.

Hanatori had never once changed her approach to work based on whether she felt energetic or motivated.

She was a respectable working adult who could always complete her duties with iron will, no matter what. Hitoe-chan so impressive! That's what she prided herself on.

But she was wrong.

Now she realized for the first time that throughout her long working life, for all 365 days, she'd never lost motivation for even a single second.

Well, that was only natural. She had wanted to take care of Oduka Mai-sama. Even though there were plenty of annoying client interactions and tedious management paperwork that came with the job, none of it bothered her.

No... come to think of it, there had been just one time in the past.

A moment when the thread snapped completely.

But anyway.

This time, the engagement between Oduka Mai and Lucie Lefebvre was announced.

Ever since then, Hanatori had been completely out of sorts.

She'd known Lucie well since childhood. Whenever Mai visited France for work, Hanatori always accompanied her.

Height: 168 centimeters. Weight: light as a feather, and her appearance was truly that of a European fairy.

Despite her pale skin and hair, she radiated a brilliant presence. Like Oduka Mai, she was one of the chosen few blessed ones, a masterpiece created by God.

If she weren't in this line of work, she would never have the chance to witness such a miraculous beauty up close in her lifetime.

Lucie was undoubtedly a rare flower. Among Earth's 8 billion people, in terms of beauty and grace, no one could be more suitable for Mai than her...

But there was someone.

Overcoming astronomical odds, just one person.

Only Hanatori knew this. That's why the pain in her chest wouldn't subside.

Koto Satsuki.

She was the one in 8 billion.

"...Koto-sama..."

Her small whisper was swallowed up by the vibrations of the drum washing machine.

Oduka Mai's childhood friend and a long-haired beauty. While she might inevitably pale in comparison to Lucie in terms of glamour and recognition, only Hanatori knew.

More than any influencer in the world, more than any person in power, Satsuki was the most suitable partner for Mai.

Because Hanatori had seen it.

The moment when Satsuki protected Mai.

This was back when Mai was still in elementary school.

While Queen Rose had now established itself as a solid original brand, back then they didn't even have their own building and were in a much more unstable position.

Though Hanatori had been promoted to manager, due to staff shortages, she did whatever needed doing. Sales, paperwork, helping with household chores at the Oduka family home—it was all part of the job.

Everything was for the sake of letting Oduka Mai shine in this world.

Together with company president Oduka Renée, Hanatori had a dream. Mai's presence was essential to making Queen Rose known to the world. Oduka Mai was a raw gem that would emit light endlessly as long as it was polished. So everything was for Mai's sake—Hanatori threw everything aside and pushed forward.

Mai-sama never uttered a single complaint, carrying the company's name on her shoulders for her mother's sake, handling a schedule packed down to the minute.

Having all her private time stolen away, it should have been Hanatori who was closest to seeing young Mai growing exhausted.

Hanatori should have been watching the whole time as Mai slept like a log during the brief moments in the car rides to and from work, then straightened her posture to face work again.

She should have known that Mai wasn't Hanatori's savior or god, but just an elementary school girl.

With a body weighing less than 40 kilograms, Mai continued to bear the weight of the employees' livelihoods, her mother's dreams, and her own faith.

So when Hanatori heard that Mai had sabotaged her work, along with the earth-shaking shock, she felt like she'd somehow been expecting this day to come.

And she realized her own shallow nature for unconsciously averting her eyes from it all along.

After desperately bowing her head over and over, apologizing to all the related parties.

Hanatori decided to resign.

Of course. Even though she knew that quitting wouldn't erase her sins, she couldn't stay with Mai any longer.

She wasn't worthy of Mai.

If she had simply failed to notice Mai's will and missed her SOS signals, that could still be forgiven as foolishness due to incompetence.

But she had allowed the young princess who trusted her to be overworked out of her own base desire to show Mai off to the world, and had hurt her.

Unlike Renée, she hadn't even truly believed in Mai's happiness.

'Will Hanatori-san stay by my side?'

Even though she'd decided to stay by Mai's side when asked that.

Her heart shattered.

Still, when she received contact from Renée in her fragile state of mind, she thought she'd fulfill one last job before disappearing.

She took out the car to pick up Mai. Apparently Mai was at a friend's house.

That's when Hanatori realized she didn't even know about Mai's friendships. While she could perfectly manage the thousands of photos of Mai—knowing which order and timing they'd be released to the media—she couldn't name a single classmate.

The car carrying Renée arrived in front of an apartment building.

Renée stepped down into the colorless world. Renée, who was probably as shocked as herself, was trying to fulfill her duty as a mother properly.

Compared to that, she was...

After parking in a nearby lot, she followed Renée. Hanatori had made up her mind. She would apologize to Mai, quit her job, and return to Saga.

She'd have an arranged marriage as her parents wished and live a life suited to her station. It was all wrong for someone like her to reach for the light—

And then Hanatori witnessed it.

'Don't take her away!'

A single girl stood with both arms spread wide, blocking Renée's path.

She looked like any ordinary black-haired girl.

But she was different.

'Mai just wanted to play with us, she didn't do anything wrong! My mom says playing is a child's job! Don't do terrible things to Mai!'

Behind that girl was Mai.

Mai was crying with hiccupping sobs.

'Mai doesn't have to go anywhere! She can just become our family! I'll always stay with her—!'

There was light there.

Someone had to reach out their hand to Mai. And a girl Mai's age had done exactly that. Standing before that Renée whom even adult Hanatori feared, not backing down even one step.

Hanatori's shattered heart was remade once more before that scene.

That's right, she thought.

Exactly right.

Mai should always be with this girl.

There was no way she could make Mai happy. But maybe she could help ensure these two stayed together forever.

No, she had to. That was her atonement.

And so—

Ever since then, Hanatori Hitoe decided to live her life for Oduka Mai and Koto Satsuki.

Hanatori shook her head and stood up in a daze.

In the end, she couldn't fulfill her vow.

She believed she could now truly wish for her mistress's happiness from the bottom of her heart, but...

There wasn't just one path to Mai's happiness. She had become much stronger than before. Strong enough to find her own happiness. So wanting Mai and Satsuki to be together was probably just her own ego in the end...

...No, even so. For Mai's sake, she had to somehow overturn this engagement with Lucie.

Regardless of whether Hanatori liked it or not—Mai already had someone important she'd chosen for herself. Protecting Mai's happiness surely meant nothing other than that.

That's right. This wasn't the time to be losing spirit. There were still things she could do for her master. Hanatori steeled herself again. First, the rest of the housework. Fight on, Hitoe-chan.

After working for a while, just as she finished her tasks, she heard the front door open.

It was Mai. She'd said she'd be coming home directly from Queen Rose headquarters today. Hanatori headed to the entrance to greet her master.

"Welcome home, Mai-sama..."

"Ah, I'm back, Hanatori-san."

There, she spotted a black-haired beauty and her eyes widened.

"...Koto-sama."

"It's been since the pool the other day, hasn't it, Hanatori-san. I'm just dropping by for a bit."

"Y-yes. Of course."

Seeing the two of them side by side, her lingering feelings rose up again.

That said, even after Mai chose her own lover, Hanatori wanted Satsuki to remain a good friend and continue getting along with her. That was Hanatori's heartfelt wish.

"I just finished talking with Mama. I thought I should tell Hanatori-san too."

Mai smiled at Satsuki. Satsuki crossed her arms with her usual composed face.

"Do whatever you like."

I wonder what this is about.

Her heart was pounding strangely. She felt like she might indulge in some convenient delusion.

No, no. She should stop these base thoughts. That was only for the time before bed when she fantasized about married life.

By the way, Mai and Satsuki had (in Hanatori's fantasies) lived 27 lifetimes together, and were now (in Hanatori's fantasies) living their 28th life. Last night (in Hanatori's fantasies) Hanatori had purchased honeymoon tickets for the two of them. Dreaming about what kind of happy days the married couple would spend day by day was Hanatori's small hobby. The problem was that every time the two (in Hanatori's fantasies) died of old age, (the real) Hanatori would sob uncontrollably for a while and be unable to focus on any work.

Anyway.

Hanatori mobilized all her nerves to create a natural-looking smile.

"What is it? Don't tell me Koto-sama is going to help with modeling work again?"

Satsuki sighed softly and murmured.

"...That might be nice too."

!?

With those words, Hanatori's feelings nearly soared to heaven.

Would she get to see Mai and Satsuki side by side again? And both of them having grown so truly beautiful at that. Her heart wouldn't stop racing. It felt like Mai's, Satsuki's, and Renée's birthdays had all come at once. Ah, Mai-sama, how much more joy do you intend to bring me—

And then, Mai put her arm around Satsuki's shoulder and smiled brightly.

"Actually, I've decided to get engaged to Satsuki."

—

Satsuki nodded casually, saying "That's how it is."

Mai smiled at Satsuki saying "Well, I'm happy."

Satsuki frowned at Mai saying "Are you planning to tell everyone?"

Mai to Satsuki "I'll leave the timing of the official announcement to Mama. But Hanatori-san is like family to me. I should report—"

Satsuki "Fine. Do as you like."

Satsuki Mai

Death—

Her vision turned pure white. Voices grew distant.

While Mai and Satsuki continued their playful conversation.

At that moment, Hanatori Hitoe's heart completely stopped for about three seconds...

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"What's going on!?"

As if piercing through the cloudy sky, my—Amaori Renako's—scream echoed as I held my head in my hands.

After the cultural festival ended, on the first day of the new school week, I'd come to the rooftop first thing in the morning.

I'd been called out by the person in question—Koto Satsuki.

It was getting pretty cold to be outside in just my uniform, but I knew this wasn't something we could talk about inside the school.

I thought peace had finally returned after my sister's problem was resolved...

I have to interrogate her... When Satsuki-san gets here, I have to bite into her like a crocodile and interrogate her...

What's even going on with Mai...

First Lucie-chan, now Satsuki-san... Are you Amaori Renako...!?

No, I'm different...! It's more like... well, you know. Dammit! I can't say anything! Anyway, this isn't about me right now, it's about Mai and Satsuki-san!

I heard the sound of the door opening with a clank.

I whipped around.

"Hey!? What's going on!? I seriously have no idea what's happening! April Fool's is still way off, right!?"

I rushed toward her like I was about to grab her.

Then.

"Kyaa!"

"Ah, eh?"

The person there was a gentle beauty with soft, flowing hair. It was Sena Ajisai-san.

Her red face was close. She looked at me with startled eyes, and I hurriedly backed away.

"S-sorry!"

"N-no. Rena-chan, you got called out here too..."

Ajisai-san, looking flustered, held her chest and smiled shyly.

"So you too, Ajisai-san...?"

"Yeah. Satsuki-chan said she wanted to explain properly..."

"Hmm..."

I put my hand to my chin and groaned.

"...What do you think about this whole situation, Ajisai-san?"

"I'm thinking there must be some circumstances behind it..."

As expected of the saint who symbolizes humanity's goodness, Ajisai-san who combines both strength and kindness.

If invading aliens said they'd choose one random human sample from Earth and decide whether to destroy humanity based on that person, I'd definitely want Ajisai-san to be chosen. Then Earth would be safe forever after.

I can't be like this!

"What if Satsuki-san really likes Mai and got involved in stealing someone's love...!"

When I brought my face close and appealed to her, Ajisai-san lowered her eyebrows and smiled.

"That's... I wonder. I don't know, but I don't think she'd do it this way..."

"But it's Koto Satsuki!?"

"U-uh, yeah. It's Satsuki-chan, right?"

This is bad. Ajisai-san and I have a difference in perception.

Suddenly, there's something called 'Personal Construct Theory.'

It's a theory that people each have evaluation standards called constructs, and they see the world through those lenses.

What that means is, for example, when one book gets both 'Super interesting!' and 'Seriously boring!' as completely opposite reactions, this is said to be why.

Some people in this world prioritize story, others prioritize characters, some think it's boring if it's not a happy ending—everyone has completely different judgment standards. This is caused by differences in each person's personal constructs.

In other words, it's just a matter of 'whether you like it or not'—pretty blunt.

So when evaluating something or giving opinions, it's important for each person to be aware of their own constructs, that kind of thing.

Now, turning to Koto Satsuki.

I think Satsuki-san is an incredible person. She's beautiful, smart, hardworking, cares about her friends, and is kind in her own way.

But... but.

I know that Satsuki-san sometimes does strange things.

The FPS challenge she threw at Mai is a prime example. At that time, Satsuki-san said something like the winner would marry me. And when I asked about it later, apparently it was just going with the flow. When Mai's involved, she decides her whole life on a whim. That's who Satsuki-san is.

In other words, you never know what Satsuki-san might do. If someone picked a fight with her and she said something like 'Then I'll marry Mai' as a retort, I wouldn't find it strange...

"Ajisai-san, you need to be more aware of your own constructs..."

"Eh, me!? And what's a construct...?"

"When judging anything, Ajisai-san's eyes have a strong filter of 'all people are good people'!"

"That's not true~"

"That's only because Ajisai-san is a good person—not everyone else is good! I wouldn't be surprised if Satsuki-san said something like 'Actually, I love stealing other people's things. My hobby is stealing lovers. I thought about what would damage you the most and this is what I came up with'!"

"That's a rough emulation."

"No way! Satsuki-san would totally say that! She's always stabbing vital points with knives from blind spots! What a fine skill! Why don't you become an assassin!?"

—Killing intent.

I turned around. There was Satsuki-san with her arms crossed and a Buddha-like expression, and Mai with a bright smile.

Ashigaya High's two great leaders. The appearance of these incredibly beautiful girls made the rooftop suddenly brighten.

Contrary to my inner feelings!

"Hey there."

"You've been saying quite a lot about me."

"Um, well..."

I panicked.

"But Satsuki-san definitely prefers stealing lovers to being cuckolded, right!"

"Netorare...? Netori...?"

Ajisai-san repeated the words with lots of question marks floating above her head. Wait!

"You can't use such lewd words, Ajisai-san!"

"Ehhh!?"

Ajisai-san's face turned red in an instant.

"Let's ignore the idiot and start talking."

Satsuki-san cut me down. Yes ma'am...

And so, all four members of the Quintet except Kaho-chan gathered on the winter rooftop.

First, Mai bowed deeply.

"First of all, I'm sorry. I've caused you all worry again."

"Um..."

"No, Mai-chan. But what happened?"

"Right. Let me explain from the beginning."

Mai began speaking in a calm tone.

"I was working to get the previous engagement announcement retracted, but Mama wouldn't listen to me at all."

No way.

"There are still two years until I'm of marriageable age, but knowing how thorough Mama is, it's not hard to imagine that she'd gradually close off all my options while I'm taking my time. I wanted to avoid being constantly on the defensive."

Mai's mother had apparently gotten worried after Mai held that matchmaking party before, and was trying to secure Mai's future early.

Mai had been fighting to do something about this recently, but it didn't seem to be going as she hoped.

It wouldn't be proper for me to comment on other people's family affairs. But... the relationship between Mai and her mother doesn't look very healthy.

A mother who's the president of a big company and her daughter who's the company's representative model. It would be difficult to judge their relationship by the standards of a normal family, but...

"But then, someone reached out to help me."

Mai's face brightened up.

"A very important, kind-hearted best friend who's always been by my side."

Three pairs of eyes focused on her.

The very important, kind-hearted best friend closed her eyes modestly.

"It's not that big a deal."

"Hehehe."

Mai smiled with genuine joy.

"Even a heroic act of putting your body on the line to save someone gets dismissed as 'not that big a deal.' My best friend is shy and extremely noble. I'd like to present her with a personally-made trophy."

"I don't want it..."

Satsuki-san wrinkled her brow in genuine distaste. Mai, thinking even that was just her being embarrassed, laughed.

"Um, so what exactly...?"

When I pressed for details, Mai puffed out her chest like a parent whose child had won first place in a relay race.

"Satsuki said she'd volunteer to be the fiancée. I'm sure no one else would have worked. It was because it was Satsuki's proposal—someone Mama has known since childhood—that she agreed, saying 'If it's you.'"

"Don't get the wrong idea, Amaori, Sena."

Satsuki-san turned her gaze toward us.

"Let me be clear—I have no intention of actually marrying Mai."

Satsuki-san declared this in her usual tone.

No intention...?

"I'm putting on an act to drive away the fiancée. I'll stay in the position of fiancée until Mai reaches marriageable age, then break off the

engagement with some appropriate excuse. Then you all can go back to dating openly."

At those words, Ajisai-san and I naturally looked at each other.

Yes, while it might not be entirely normal, Ajisai-san, Mai, and I were all dating each other in a three-way relationship. You could say this was making the situation more complicated.

I digested Satsuki-san's words. So that means...

Before I could say anything, Ajisai-san asked in a small voice.

"You mean... lying to her mother...?"

Mai caught her breath slightly.

Ajisai-san hurriedly waved both hands.

"Oh, sorry. I'm not trying to blame you two, it's just... I was curious."

"That's right."

Satsuki-san declared it brazenly.

"We're deceiving her."

Then she looked at Mai beside her.

"What? The one who did something selfish like 'forcibly deciding on a fiancée' first was her side. You don't need to feel guilty, Mai. Or what?"

Satsuki-san spread her hands, gesturing toward us.

"Are you going to give up? On your lovers?"

This time, Ajisai-san and I fell silent.

A brief silence fell.

From outside came the scattered greeting voices of students arriving at school.

...I wonder. I can't tell whether this is a good thing or a bad thing.

But I think I'm happy that I can maintain my current relationship with Mai.

"Mai already chose, didn't she? Not that girl, but Amaori and Sena. If that's the case, hesitating now is pointless. Listen, to choose means—"

I reflexively continued Satsuki-san's words.

"...not choosing anything else."

I gasped. I'd interrupted at a key moment.

Satsuki-san nodded with a resigned expression.

"Exactly. Even Amaori understands that."

Mai smiled gently.

"No, it's fine. Thank you, Satsuki. For being considerate and deliberately speaking that way. I understand what I need to do too."

"...Well, that's how it is. Please make sure to act like proper fiancées in public. Don't let anything slip."

Satsuki-san made sure to drill this into us.

...Anyway, I understood the reason why Satsuki-san was announced as the new fiancée, but.

There was still something bothering me.

"Um... why are you going so far to help us, Satsuki-san?"

Satsuki-san moved her eyebrows suspiciously.

"...Why, you ask?"

"Well, I mean..."

I thought it was a situation without much benefit for Satsuki-san.

Though it would also be very much like Satsuki-san to reach out with good intentions when Mai was really in trouble...

I wonder what this unsettling feeling is. I can't express it well, but something feels off.

Is this also because of my constructs?

Like, there's probably some ulterior motive anyway...

Satsuki-san sighed softly.

"I don't really want to say this myself, but—"

She glanced at Mai.

"Is it so surprising that I'd help Mai without considering my own gain?"

"N-not at all—"

As I was flustered by her direct statement, Satsuki-san said:

"Then just think I'm doing it for Sena."

"Eh... me?"

To Ajisai-san, who'd suddenly been brought into the conversation, Satsuki-san spoke quietly.

"...Yes. I don't care about Mai and Amaori, but Sena would be sad if things stayed as they were. I owe you quite a bit. I'm just paying it all back at once."

"Satsuki-chan..."

"Besides, when you get down to it, I haven't done anything that major. Mai and I just had a talk with her mother. There'll probably be more things to do related to the Oduka family going forward, but that's nothing special either."

...Is that how it is?

But Satsuki-san specifically saying she was doing it "for someone" didn't seem very much like her usual self.

If you asked me what exactly felt different, I'd be stumped, but...

"That said, the situation has gotten a bit complicated. I understand why Amaori is confused."

"Well, yes."

She was right. As Satsuki-san said, unexpected information kept coming at me one after another, so I was probably confused.

Satsuki-san took out a notebook from her pocket.

"So let me draw a diagram of your current situation."

Ajisai-san and I were surprised at the same time.

"A diagram!?"

Satsuki-san, having finished drawing the diagram, frowned suspiciously.

"What is... this Five-kun?"

"What are you talking about? Have you forgotten how Five-kun has been helping me all this time? He's my emotional support."

"I see... It doesn't matter, but personifying replaceable objects makes your impression terrible."

I had no idea what Satsuki-san was talking about, but we recently got a PS5 at home. The specs got a major power-up too. The body is smart and cool, and I'm head over heels for Five-kun. I probably won't be starting up my PS4... or should I say Four-kun... anymore.

Anyway, this diagram seems roughly accurate.

"Love... saying it so clearly like that..."

Ajisai-san, who had been peeking at the diagram with me, got embarrassed and fidgeted. So incredibly cute.

"So then."

Satsuki-san snapped the notebook shut.

"This solves the problem with her mother. You don't need to worry about anything. Things will probably still be noisy around Mai for a while, but once that storm passes, you can go back to the three of you dating happily like before."

Satsuki-san brushed her beautiful hair and smiled thinly.

"Congratulations, you three. I hope you continue to be happy."

I definitely have this feeling of "is this really okay?"

But under the circumstances, this might be the best strategy. After all, it's a method that Mai and Satsuki-san, who know Mai's mother well, came up with together.

At the very least, Mai's stress should be significantly reduced. Mai dealing with conflict with her mother did look really tough to watch...

I'm not a representative good person of humanity like Ajisai-san, so I ended up suspecting Satsuki-san one-sidedly, but in the end, Satsuki-san is kind.

She's been worrying about Mai since they were children.

But still...

I was still bothered, so just as we were heading back from the rooftop to the classroom, I secretly asked Satsuki-san.

"Hey, Satsuki-san."

Mai and Ajisai-san went down the stairs. Only Satsuki-san stopped.

"...It's not actually because you really like Mai... is it?"

At my question.

Satsuki-san slowly turned around.

Satsuki-san had a sardonic smile pulling at the corner of her mouth.

"You idiot."

Then she brought her face close to mine.

Almost like a whisper.

"Mai likes you."

At those words, I didn't know what to say and just nodded.

"Y-yeah."

That was it.

After staring at me for a moment, Satsuki-san walked away as if she'd suddenly lost interest.

...Um.

Cold wind blew through under the gloomy cloudy sky.

In the end, that brief exchange only made me realize that I didn't understand anything about Satsuki-san at all.

***

With the cultural festival over, all of Ashigaya High's big winter events were finished. I thought peaceful days would flow by toward winter break, but...

A Mai whirlwind like a hurricane was raging through the school.

Well of course! That makes sense!

Mai and Lucie-chan's engagement felt like something from a different world, but this time the partner was Satsuki-san.

After all, two incredibly gorgeous fiancées were contained in the same class. In this day and age of Reiwa, even just two top-caste girls dating normally would cause a huge commotion, but this came with a media announcement. It would be stranger if it didn't become a topic.

"Hey, hey, was that kind of thing decided since way back!?" "Those two had that kind of relationship!?" "An engagement between beauties is so romantic~!" "Will you become Oduka Satsuki!? Or Koto Mai!? Ahh, both are too wonderful...!"

Not just the popular Mai, but even Satsuki-san, who obviously radiates an aura of disliking people, gets surrounded by students wherever she goes.

When the two are together, it's like a festival.

"Kyaa!"

Every time Mai looked at Satsuki-san, every time Satsuki-san said something to Mai, cheers like at an idol concert erupted.

Even heroes who saved the world and returned home in triumph probably wouldn't get this level of fever. Takada Himiko-san, who had been burning with rivalry toward Mai and feeling frustrated, must have ruined her handkerchiefs for sure.

Meanwhile.

I was living peaceful days.

"Man, things have gotten pretty crazy, haven't they..."

"They sure have..."

Kaho-chan and I talked about this during break time.

In the Quintet, only Kaho-chan hadn't been told about Satsuki-san's true intentions... but she seemed to have sensed there was something more to it anyway.

'I mean, it's obviously weird that Satsuki-san is properly handling fan service for the gallery. It's like she's appealing to everyone that she's the

fiancée. Plus, the fact that Rena-chin and Ajisai-chan are just letting it slide says everything.'

Detective Kaho-chan strikes again. Her mind works so fast, I genuinely respect it.

Even toward me, feeling somewhat guilty about keeping secrets:

'Oh, you don't need to tell me the answer. The fact that you haven't told me probably means it's hard to talk about with anyone who's not directly involved.'

She even said that. This friend is just way too cool.

Kaho-chan, being such a mature person, tries to reassure me by showing her less mature side on purpose.

Putting her hand to her mouth and narrowing her eyes with a mischievous grin:

"But Rena-chin, seeing Mai-Mai and Saa-chan all lovey-dovey must be pretty complicated for you, right?"

"Nah, not really..."

"Really?"

If Satsuki-san was all 'Hanyaan♡ I love love love Mai-chan, lovey-dovey chu chu♡', I might get a little annoyed, but I have complete faith that would never happen.

"But still, she's her fiancée, you know?"

"Yeah."

Kaho-chan wiggled her body while raising the corners of her mouth.

"They're living together~ and maybe sleeping in the same bed at night~?"

"I think Satsuki-san would say 'That's annoying, I'm sleeping alone.'"

"Maybe they're taking baths together and washing each other's bodies!"

"I think Satsuki-san would just say 'Annoying' and take her bath alone without anyone bothering her."

"What do you think Saa-chan is!?"

Eh...!?

What do I think of Satsuki-san...

"Satsuki-san is... I can only say she's Satsuki-san..."

"Saa-chan is just one high school girl in love like any other ☆"

Kaho-chan winked with a snap.

But I quietly shook my head.

"...No..."

"What do you mean no?"

"Satsuki-san is... Satsuki-san."

Even when I wracked my brain, that's all I could come up with.

"Isn't your thinking locked up?"

"Maybe it is!?"

I don't know. I don't understand anything about Satsuki-san. Even though we're supposed to be best friends...

"But Satsuki-san said 'I don't fall in love'..."

Yes, at every opportunity, Satsuki-san had made her position clear.

Even when she sent me that message asking me to 'go out' with her, it was probably just harassment toward Mai or something.

She said the reason was 'I don't want to say,' but... that's probably what it was.

Besides, I think the idea that all high school girls fall in love is just social prejudice. If I hadn't met Mai and Ajisai-san, I'd probably be living a youth with no interest in romance right now.

That would have been plenty happy too.

"...So I don't think it's really anything..."

Watching me mutter this, Kaho-chan fell silent for a moment.

But then she stretched big.

"Tch. That didn't get to you at all. I was trying so hard to make Rena-chin jealous too~"

"Why!?"

"It's boring~"

"Honestly..."

Kaho-chan was her usual self. But maybe it's thanks to Kaho-chan not breaking her pace that I'm able to keep my mental state together too.

It's better to have someone tease you than to carry secrets you can't tell anyone—it keeps you from getting too serious about things... I'm grateful.

The class bell rang and I returned to my seat.

Then I noticed Ajisai-san, who sits in front of me, wasn't chatting with anyone and was just staring blankly out the window. That's a bit unusual.

Her profile seemed to highlight the beauty of her features themselves more than her usual friendly cuteness. Ajisai-san really is beautiful...

"You know..."

Ajisai-san opened her mouth like she was talking to herself, without looking this way.

"Lately when I walk down the halls, I feel sympathetic looks from people I don't know..."

"The MaiAji faction's defeat!?"

Apparently at Ashigaya High, the MaiSatsu faction and MaiAji faction had been waging underground warfare over Mai. Arguing whether Satsuki-san or Ajisai-san was more suitable for the super darling...

And now this fiancée commotion. The hardcore MaiAji fans might be extending sympathy to the defeated Ajisai-san... Such unnecessary meddling...

"I haven't been defeated though..."

Ajisai-san pouted at the world's injustice.

Lately I often catch glimpses of Ajisai-san getting sulky at random moments. Her eyes following Satsuki-san or directed at Mai.

For Ajisai-san, who's usually smiling and gentle, it's pretty unusual... Maybe she's just not satisfied with this whole situation.

I feel the same complexity... But there's really nothing I can do about this situation...

As I was rummaging through my bag to prepare for class.

"Hup."

"Heh!?"

Someone ran their finger down my back from the side. The tickling sensation made all my body hair stand on end as I hurriedly turned forward.

"Wh-what!?"

Ajisai-san continued looking out the window with a disinterested voice.

"Nothing~"

"But you just!?"

Ajisai-san almost never does this kind of mischief... Did she catch it from Kaho-chan...?

But since Ajisai-san wouldn't meet my eyes, I reluctantly reached for my bag again.

"Hup."

"Stop! Again!"

My spine got traced with a finger again and I let out a shriek. Ajisai-san is acting weird too!

***

The whole school feels somehow restless. That's how big of a shock Mai and Satsuki-san's engagement announcement was.

Though it's not my place to say, but the world getting all worked up over other people's romance makes me think... how peaceful...

Well, I think it's a good thing. Way better than everyone getting excited over stories about someone hitting someone else or bullying.

Peace is wonderful. It keeps your mental state stable. Peace is the best.

I want to live a peaceful life where nothing happens. Yeah, I'll do that. A life unrelated to conflict. Always calm, never disturbed, like a plant...

That's what I thought—until that very moment.

While walking home to the station, someone grabbed my arm hard.

Huh—

I was forcibly dragged into an alley. Huh!?

"Wh-wh-wh-what!?"

A kidnapping!? Abduction!? The Amaori family is just a normal household!?

The girl who pulled such a suspiciously criminal move looked desperate.

"Renako-kun...!"

"Y-Youko-chan...?"

My friend from Class 1-B, Terusawa Youko-chan.

Usually bright, energetic, and cute, but also the dangerous girl who left bite marks on my neck when we showered together.

I instinctively pressed my hand to my neck while saying:

"Why are you scaring people like that!? Just call out to me normally! I thought my heart was going to fly out of my mouth!?"

"S-sorry about that!"

Youko-chan acknowledged her fault and apologized. Ugh... if she apologizes, I can't say anything more...!

"But! I can't handle this by myself anymore!"

"Wh-what...?"

This is the first time I've seen Youko-chan this flustered. She must be really desperate. My lungs filled with a bad premonition.

No... it wasn't the first time.

I'd witnessed Youko-chan, usually a carefree beauty, showing a face she'd never show at school and getting furious.

"You know what I'm talking about, right!?"

"D-don't tell me—"

Youko-chan screamed desperately.

"It's about our selfish princess!"

Ah...!

Youko-chan touched her IC card key to the apartment door and slowly opened it.

The curtains were drawn shut and the room was dim.

Gulp...

I involuntarily swallowed.

I thought I saw something moving in the back. It was probably a person completely wrapped in blankets...

Wh-why is this getting all horror-like!? This is way scarier than our class's haunted house!

Then Youko-chan put her hand on my shoulder. Eep.

When I turned around trembling, Youko-chan had clear eyes.

"Well then, Renako-kun. I'm leaving the rest to you."

"...Eh!?"

"I have no responsibility for this. Farewell!"

"Ah, wait!?"

Youko-chan spun around and disappeared in an instant.

Heyyy!

Wh-wh-what kind of person does that!? She dumped everything on me! On me, who's only met Lucie-chan three times!

Damn... I remembered my previous visit to this room.

Youko-chan really doesn't want to deal with Lucie-chan...

Then, from the back of the room came a weak voice.

"...Renako-sama...?"

Ugh...

Once my name was called, I couldn't run away either...

I took off my shoes and timidly entered the room.

The room's owner, Lucie-chan, looked up at me while wrapped in blankets.

Her eyes were red and swollen.

That's right—peace was all lies.

Here was one girl who'd been made unhappy by Mai and Satsuki-san's scheme.

"Ngh..."

A model from France and Mai's former fiancée. Lucie Lefebvre, heartbroken from being unilaterally dumped, had her big eyes full of tears as she hugged me.

"Renako-sama!"

"Whoa!?"

The momentum was incredible and I got pushed down to the floor.

Beautiful silver hair down to her waist and blue eyes. Her white skin seemed to emit a pale light. Lucie-chan wore a negligee with a wide-open neckline (or is it called a babydoll?) and covered me.

Lucie-chan sniffled. Even in the dim room, the brilliance of her eyes hadn't clouded at all.

"Um, well..."

S-somehow... this position is... bad...!?

Lucie-chan wet with tears had, how should I put it, with that outfit too, an alluring charm overflowing... Crying beauties really make a picture, you know... So incredibly cute!

Lucie-chan, who usually has fantastical beauty, suddenly seemed like someone close to me because of those tears. The texture, or rather, the physical sensation... that kind of thing made my chest pound wildly.

"Renako-sama..."

Her cherry-colored lips called my name clingingly. My heartbeat was so loud I couldn't think about anything.

"L-Lucie-chan..."

Lucie-chan sat down with a plop, straddling me. Actually, she was pressing down on me. Wait, isn't this position dangerous!?

Lucie-chan, mounted on me, grabbed both my hands.

"Please, come with Lucie..."

"T-together...!?"

Together!? What!? What are you planning to do!?

Stop! I have girlfriends! Really cute and beautiful girlfriends—two of them!? Cheating is bad!? So don't tempt me! I'm bad at refusing things! Don't tempt me, okay!?

Contrary to my noisy inner thoughts, my mouth just opened and closed repeatedly, unable to form words.

Lucie-chan tilted her head slightly, tears at the corners of her eyes, and put strength into the hands gripping mine.

Then she smiled as bravely as she could and said:

"Let's go blow up Queen Rose."

...

...

"Eh!?"

In a way, that was an incredibly heart-pounding invitation...

You're not serious, right!? Lucie-chan!

Chapter 2: There's No Freaking Way We Can Blow Up Queen Rose! (※Thank God We Can't!)

—And so.

This is where I finally get dragged into the incredibly beautiful but messy love triangle between Mai, Satsuki-san, and Lucie-chan...

In the end, I think this was a necessary event for all of us too.
...Probably.

On social media, someone's shouting "I want 50 trillion yen!" today too, but what they really want is pocket money of a few ten thousand yen they can freely spend and leisurely free time to spoil themselves.

Even though I wished for the best 'best friend' I could truly trust, what I really wanted was a version of myself I could be proud of.

Everyone insists "This is what I want!" about what they desire, but you don't know what you really want until you're backed into a corner.

Because human relationships are complex, and human hearts are even more complex.

Even if someone points it out to you, you'll never understand.

Only by realizing it yourself.

But still, surely.

Even if it's roundabout, even if you get lost, even if you take detours, even if you're wrong—the time you spend struggling with everything you've got, wishing to obtain something, isn't wasted.

...No, I want to think that way.

Those days when you face each day trying to become just a little bit more blessed than yesterday's self, within irreplaceable time—that's exactly what it is.

I think that's exactly what we call 'youth.'

'Feelings' are far too big, so overwhelming that us high school girls get swept away by them every day.

But sometimes, they give us unbelievably strong power.

Like that day when I swore I'd make both Mai and Ajisai-san happy together.

So, once more.

For us to achieve ourselves.

We face our 'feelings.'

***

Um... I, Amaori Renako, am currently hiding in the bushes in front of Queen Rose headquarters in Shibuya...

If anyone saw me, they'd call the police immediately...

And next to me was Lucie-chan, wearing what looked like a princess-like dress as casual clothes, with an incredibly expensive-looking fur coat over it.

Even I thought my uniform would be too suspicious, so I went home once to change into regular clothes... I wanted to disguise myself if possible... Why am I doing this...

"Now then, Renako-sama."

Lucie-chan smoothly pulled out a gleaming black credit card from her fur coat pocket.

"Please use this to buy bombs. Money is no object!"

"I don't think they sell those... This is Japan..."

When I said that, Lucie-chan looked as shocked as if a hawk had stolen the crepe she was about to eat.

"Eh... then how should Lucie blow up Queen Rose...?"

"I think you should recognize it's an impossible plan..."

"Impossible n'est pas français."

Lucie-chan spoke in fluent French. Eh!?

Then I heard a familiar voice from above.

"'Nothing is impossible for the French.' In Japan, it's generally known as Napoleon's famous saying, 'The word impossible is not in my dictionary.'"

Oh no.

I looked up. There stood a woman with a gentle smile.

—Oduka Mai.

"Mai!?"

The person I least wanted to run into right now!

Well of course Mai would be here—this is in front of Queen Rose headquarters!

"Hey there, Renako... and Lucie. What an unusual combination."

"Um, well, this is!"

I stood up to make excuses and turned around.

But Lucie-chan, who had been next to me just moments ago, was gone.

She ran away!? Leaving me all alone!?

No, wait. Lucie-chan was hiding behind a street tree in the distance. Though half her body is sticking out!

"Lucie."

Mai called out to her. Then Lucie-chan:

"Ça fait un bail ! Comment vas-tu!? Comment te sens-tu!? J'espère que tu vas bien!"

She's rapid-firing French again at incredible speed! I don't understand!

"Hmm..."

Mai looked back and forth between me and Lucie-chan.

"N-no, this has deep circumstances..."

"I'm sure it does."

"Look, both Lucie-chan and I play games, right!? So we're like gaming buddies! We met by coincidence! I only recently found out that Lucie-chan was Mai's fiancée!"

Those words are all completely true, but since I'm speaking rapidly while flustered, even I sound unconvincing!

Mai examined my statement with the face of a detective in the second half of a mystery drama.

"Hmm... What kind of 'coincidence'?"

"Um... Near the station... I found Lucie-chan lost and unable to get home, hugging her knees on the roadside..."

This is exactly what they mean by "hanging yourself with your own words." No one in modern Japan would believe such an excuse.

"I see. That's a believable story if it's Lucie."

"She believed it!?"

This girl actually has 'can't get home' in her behavioral patterns. No wonder Youko-chan suffers.

Then Lucie-chan peeked her face out from behind the street tree and showed a modest smile.

"Eh, ehehe... That's right, Renako-sama is my lifesaver. Mai should thank Renako-sama too."

"Thank you, Renako."

"Eh, ah, yes."

She bowed her head honestly.

Mai smiled gently.

"Lucie is a very innocent and charming woman, but she's a bit weak at taking care of herself."

"Oh my... calling me cute makes me embarrassed."

Lucie-chan put her hand to her cheek and grinned. It was such an innocent smile, you'd never think she was a terrorist plotting to blow up Queen Rose. Did she switch personalities...!?

"But it seems like Japanese life suits her—she's been having fun every day. I see, it was because she made a friend."

Lucie-chan nodded with all her might, like a kid who'd been invited to play by someone she really liked.

"Yes! It was worth learning so much Japanese from Mai and Satsuki."

"That's right. You've gotten really good at it. Is there anything else you're having trouble with?"

"Nothing in particular right now!"

"Well, that's good then."

The two exchanged friendly everyday conversation.

Mai approached Lucie-chan and stroked her gentle shoulders. At the light physical contact, Lucie-chan narrowed her eyes contentedly—

Then, as if a hypnotic spell had been broken, her expression changed.

"—Hah!"

She hid behind the street tree again and pointed sharply at Mai.

"That's not it!! That's not right!!"

As if she'd finally remembered her anger from before!

"Hmm?"

Perhaps used to Lucie-chan's mood swings, Mai just tilted her head lightly.

"Oh right, you said you were gaming friends. Actually, both Satsuki and I learned games from Renako before. We can play FPS a little now. We should arrange an opportunity for all four of us to play together sometime."

"Really!? Yay!"

Lucie-chan's face lit up as she burst out from behind the tree with full force like from Amaterasu's cave. S-so childish...!

But then, as if remembering again, she turned bright red.

"That's why! That's not it! Don't you understand why Lucie is here!?"

"You come to visit Queen Rose even when you don't have anything specific to do."

"Today I have business!"

Lucie-chan stamped her feet in frustration.

Then, as if pressing a missile launch button, she shouted:

"Because! Lucie and Renako-sama came to blow up Queen Rose!"

Major crime!

That statement apparently exceeded even Mai's imagination.

"B-blow up...?"

For some reason, Lucie-chan puffed out her chest and declared proudly, as if she'd successfully pulled off her first prank.

"That's right! Right now Renako-sama was about to buy really, really huge bombs in really large quantities for us! Right, right?"

"Wait! Don't drag me into this!"

I waved both my outstretched hands frantically. This was the last topic in the world I wanted to be dragged into.

Mai looked extremely confused.

"Um... so what exactly does this mean? Oh, are you talking about a game?"

"Yes, that's it!" "That's completely wrong!"

My attempt to cover it up overlapped with Lucie-chan's completely serious voice.

"Lucie is totally serious! Lucie is angry! Having the engagement broken off without permission and being left out! Lucie hasn't been this angry since... since Mai and Satsuki left Lucie out and ate sweets together! Lucie is furious!"

Lucie-chan puffed out her cheeks with all her might, trying to express her rage with her whole body. Is this the expressive power of a top French model?

Mai didn't respond to those words.

She approached Lucie-chan again, step by step, despite the distance.

"Wh-what...!"

Lucie-chan struck a mysteriously threatening pose toward Mai.

"A-ah, ahah... Even if you apologize, it's too late...! Lucie and Renako-sama have already decided to blow up Queen Rose... It's too late now...!"

Mai grabbed Lucie-chan's wrist. Lucie-chan let out a "Hyah!"

H-hey, Mai...

I got worried and hesitated about whether to interfere.

Sure, Lucie-chan was saying outrageous things, but she was also a victim who got dragged into this situation, so please don't get too angry with her...!

But Mai already understood that.

"I'm sorry, Lucie."

"—"

Mai released Lucie-chan's wrist and bowed her head sincerely.

"I apologized several times when I was proceeding with the engagement talk with Satsuki, but... let me apologize once more here. My mother forcibly pushed forward our engagement and caused you great trouble. It seems like you resolved to do it because it would benefit our company, but... it's okay."

Looking up, Mai smiled gently while slowly shaking her head.

"Lucie. I understand very well your feelings of trying to repay the debt you received from my mother. Thank you. But you have your own life. Please don't be bound by Queen Rose—I want you to find your own happiness."

Despite the gentle smile, those words were filled with passion.

I could really feel that Mai genuinely wished for Lucie-chan's happiness...

But... huh?

But then, it's almost like Lucie-chan was...

Lucie-chan, who had been leaning halfway out from behind the street tree listening to Mai's words, suddenly hid behind the tree again as if she'd realized something.

"Mai doesn't understand anything..."

"...What do you mean?"

Lucie-chan, still hidden behind the street tree, puffed out her cheeks, tried to smile, then suddenly looked like she was about to cry.

She kept changing expressions, and finally glared while pointing at Mai.

"How Lucie has been thinking about Mai all this time."

"You've been thinking of me..."

Lucie-chan glared fiercely at Mai.

"Lucie hates Mai!"

Whoa...

Not just me—Mai was surprised by those words too.

"Lucie hated Mai, who was loved by Renée and had everything!"

"But Lucie, you've always..."

"What happened before doesn't matter! Lucie is talking about now!"

Like a puppy yapping from behind a fence, Lucie-chan raised her voice.

"That's why! That's why Lucie thought she'd steal it all! That position, everything, all of it! Lucie thought that if she got engaged to Mai and married her, it would come true!"

This was my first time seeing Mai and Lucie-chan talk together.

I had no idea how Lucie-chan really felt about Mai. I could only guess from their conversation.

But this is...

"But suddenly getting engaged to Satsuki... That's unforgivable! Absolutely, forever unforgivable!"

"...I see."

Mai received Lucie-chan's gaze, then furrowed her brow painfully.

"I truly did something inexcusable. But I never intended to marry you from the beginning."

"!"

Hearing that, shock ran through Lucie-chan's eyes.

"I couldn't tell you before. I thought it would hurt you. But I have my own life too. I decided to be happy."

Mai declared resolutely.

Her decision to be happy was... because of what happened with Ajisai-san and me.

After a brief pause, Lucie-chan looked down and asked with trembling lips:

"You thought... you couldn't be happy with Lucie...?"

"That's not it either."

Mai quietly shook her head.

"You're important to me. I think of you as an irreplaceable friend I can open my heart to. Every time I went to France, I looked forward to the days I could meet you several times a year. You were always good to me. I tried to treat you with affection, like a blood sister."

Lucie-chan grasped at thin air like catching a spider's thread, murmuring "Then..."

But Mai didn't wait for Lucie-chan's words.

"But I have someone most important to me. So—"

As if repelled, Lucie-chan looked up.

"That person is—Satsuki!?"

For a moment, Mai hesitated.

Probably... she was about to tell the truth.

To receive Lucie-chan's feelings that came straight from the heart.

But—

"That's right."

A black shadow appeared there.

Long black hair swayed in the wind.

"Satsuki-san..."

Standing next to Mai, Satsuki-san put her arm around Mai's waist as if asserting ownership.

Then she turned eyes that reflected no light toward us.

"Mai chose me. That's everything, Lucie."

The stunned Lucie-chan asked in a small voice:

"Satsuki... why...!"

"I won't apologize. I'm different from Mai."

With her back straight, Satsuki-san stared back at Lucie-chan.

"To choose something means not choosing something else. Too bad for you. There's no place for you here anymore. Behave yourself and go back to France."

Satsuki-san, who had called Lucie-chan "like a troublesome little sister," spoke such cruel words.

"—!"

Hearing that, Lucie-chan gritted her teeth.

She raised her hand with all her might toward the cheek of Satsuki-san, who she had once kissed with a happy face.

Eh!?

—She tried to slap her!

Violence is wrong!

But Satsuki-san easily dodged that big swing.

"As always, so simple—"

—Right after her palm cut through empty air.

Lucie-chan's returning left hand slapped Satsuki-san's cheek!

Ehhhhhhh!

A tremendously satisfying cracking sound echoed.

I saw Satsuki-san's body tilting slightly in slow motion.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaah!"

But! Lucie-chan, who had just smacked Satsuki-san, turned on her heel and ran away!

Wait, um!

Ahhhhhh this is a disaster!

"S-sorry! Um! See you at school!"

I bowed repeatedly before chasing after Lucie-chan.

The situation had long exceeded the limits of my processing ability, and I couldn't take any of it in at all.

But still, I thought I couldn't leave Lucie-chan alone like this.

After running for a while, Lucie-chan stopped and was leaning against a random guardrail, out of breath.

Since I'm not particularly athletic either, I went over next to Lucie-chan and breathed heavily.

Ugh, this became a terrible situation...

I'd much rather have been the one who got hit...

I'm a girl who was struggling just recently with stories about hitting and not hitting people...! I don't think it would happen, but... now I'll have to solve a story where Satsuki-san becomes truant and Lucie-chan becomes a shut-in...!?

Stop it! I'll really become a shut-in myself!

I need to... provide all kinds of care...

But what should I say to her!?

"Um...!"

Like a baby who cries and screams when moved just one centimeter.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaah!"

Lucie-chan started crying with all her might!

"Uwah! L-Lucie-chan!?"

"Uwaaaaaaah! Uwaaaaaaaaaah!"

This is bad! Everyone around is staring! This is a public road!

"Lucie-chan! Lucie-chan, um!"

I took her white hand and suggested we leave.

"Everyone can see us here! It's not calm, right!? Let's walk a bit!? Just a little! Okay!?"

Like an ambulance siren, Lucie-chan continued crying at full force, loud enough to be heard from 50 kilometers away.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Far in the distance, the sunset was setting...

Lucie-chan and I had come to a nearby park on a small hill.

Leaning against the railing, the day's fatigue oozed out of my whole body...

Really, this became an incredible situation...

Youko-chan caught me and took me to Lucie-chan, then suddenly she said 'Let's blow up Queen Rose'... Then we met Mai in front of the headquarters building, and Lucie-chan said 'I hated Mai'...

Satsuki-san appeared, and when she provoked Lucie-chan, Lucie-chan slapped Satsuki-san...

How will I be able to face those two tomorrow...

I sent Mai a message earlier and got back 'Don't worry about Satsuki. More importantly, sorry for leaving Lucie to you.'

Really...? Satsuki-san won't become truant, right...? Since she's always hitting people, she must be used to being hit too, right...?

But more than that...

I glanced sideways and saw that Lucie-chan, who had stopped crying for now, was staring into the distance with swollen eyes.

Earlier she started crying when I just barely touched her with my fingertip, so this time I spoke very, very carefully...

"Lucie-chan, um... Should we go... home...?"

"..."

No response came to those words.

Lucie-chan kept her hands on the railing and began speaking quietly.

"Mai and Satsuki were Lucie's first friends."

"...Mm."

Then Lucie-chan began speaking in halting Japanese.

"Lucie was always alone. She had no parents or siblings, and lived with relatives. Every day was lonely. But one day—"

She took a breath, then murmured:

"A fairy godmother came to Cinderella's house."

She said that woman came after seeing a local children's fashion magazine.

Renée Oduka. Also known as the fairy godmother Little Witch.

She was invited to become Queen Rose's exclusive model—and since then, Lucie-chan's life completely changed.

Renée's daughter, Oduka Mai, and her friend, Koto Satsuki. The three of them had lots of photos taken together and began to flourish as models.

Thus Lucie-chan blossomed her dormant beauty and achieved worldwide success.

"Lucie loved Mai and Satsuki. When she thought about them, her lips would naturally relax and she'd feel happy. She'd never had people like that before."

...But Lucie-chan said earlier.

"Lucie's precious stuffed animal that belonged only to her. A silver coin she found on the road. A four-leaf clover she discovered in a secret place. The faint memory of Papa and Mama patting her head... That's what Mai and Satsuki are to Lucie."

As Lucie-chan held her own head, I...

"...Did you want to marry Mai?"

I regretted it immediately after asking.

Even if she answered 'yes,' there was nothing I could do about it.

Even though I should be the most involved party, I didn't have the resolve to give up my own happiness... I was just pained seeing Lucie-chan look so sad right in front of me, so I asked such an irresponsible question.

So different from Mai, who bowed her head resolutely, or Satsuki-san, who deliberately played the villain. I'm just a coward who wants to look good. Ugh, my stomach felt heavy.

"..."

Lucie-chan didn't answer right away.

Looking down, Lucie-chan opened her mouth.

"Lucie doesn't know..."

"...Mm."

"Did Lucie want to get married...?"

Um...

"But you were sad enough about the broken engagement to want to blow up Queen Rose, right...?"

"Lucie doesn't know that either."

Quietly, Lucie-chan shook her head.

"She just felt like she had to do something... her ultimate gauge kept filling up more and more... So she thought of exploding."

I see... I wish she hadn't thought of that, though...

Lucie-chan gradually let out her unstable, shapeless feelings bit by bit.

"When Renée called her, Lucie thinks she was happy. She was honestly happy that Mai thought of Lucie as special. But about 'marriage,' she never really understood... It's different from playing the same game together, right...?"

"...Yeah, probably."

"Lucie knows that marriage is something people who love each other do. That it's something you do once in a lifetime with one precious person... Actually, Lucie was thinking... that maybe it was different..."

Even though her body was so big and she looked incredibly beautiful, Lucie-chan's heart was still like a child's.

...Like me in the past.

Lucie-chan looked at me pleadingly.

"...What did Lucie really want to do...?"

Probably... I don't think Lucie-chan has romantic feelings toward Mai and Satsuki-san.

When she says she 'likes' them, it's purely as friends... Or maybe, just like Mai and Satsuki-san think, Lucie-chan also felt a special sisterly bond with them...

When she said 'Lucie hates Mai' earlier, that probably... wasn't her true feelings either.

I say 'I hate you' to my sister sometimes too, so I understand. Even when I mean it at the time, it's not really my true feelings. Well, I do mean it at the time though! It's complicated!

Lucie-chan crouched down where she stood.

"But... Lucie said she hated her..."

Seeing that incredibly dejected profile made my chest ache.

"When Lucie gets frustrated, her head goes bang... It's Lucie's really, really bad point... The feeling that she doesn't need anything anymore overflows..."

"I see... Yeah, I understand."

Getting desperate or self-destructive, wanting to hurt everything around you. Saying mean things to people close to you.

I've experienced that too.

What comes after that is intense self-loathing.

"What does Lucie-chan want to do... from now on?"

"...For now, Lucie will stop the exploding."

"Y-yeah."

Of course! Thank goodness! Now she won't become a terrorist!

"Should Lucie... apologize to Mai and Satsuki...?"

"U-umm!"

I groaned. If she wants to make up, she should do that, but considering Lucie-chan's current state, it might be better to wait a little longer...!

I want to think this through carefully and give her the right answer...!

Right, in times like this I should ask my past self. The me from when I was acting out should be able to relate to Lucie-chan's current feelings a bit!

What do you think!?

Then, middle school shut-in Renako crawled out of the darkness and opened her mouth with incredible annoyance.

'Well, whatever. Just let it fade away naturally... You don't need friends. It's better not to have them—they lower your human strength... People live alone and die alone.'

Way less helpful than I thought!

No good. There was no way this person could say anything useful. After all, she had zero life experience and could only show off other people's pretentious philosophies she picked up online. I had to do this with my own power.

"W-well! Satsuki-san was pretty mean back there too! It's understandable that you hit her! But if you feel like apologizing later, I'll come with you, so for now let's just take it easy, okay? Right?"

Procrastination!!

N-no, but there are problems that time can solve...

For now, hearing my words, Lucie-chan gave a small nod.

"...Yes."

Ugh, the atmosphere is heavy.

"But... either way, we can't be together anymore... right..."

At those words that spilled out like tears, I said:

"That's not... necessarily true, I think."

"...Eh?"

Lucie-chan turned her tear-stained eyes toward me.

Well, it's troublesome when you get your hopes up too much...!

"At least, both Mai and Satsuki-san think of Lucie-chan as important... Things are all tangled up right now, but... maybe someday you can go back to how things were..."

Why did I think that?

Because neither Mai nor Satsuki-san looked like they'd come to hate Lucie-chan at all.

Mai seemed to think Lucie-chan was being used by her mother, and I couldn't imagine Satsuki-san being the type to accept a cheek kiss from someone she disliked.

"But..."

Lucie-chan murmured softly.

"Lucie said she 'hated' Mai..."

"W-well, that's true, but..."

The light gradually faded from her eyes. Eek.

"Lucie hit Satsuki's cheek..."

"That's right!"

That really surprised me.

When Ajisai-san got hurt during the sports festival before, Satsuki-san had burned with murderous intent, saying "I'll do it thoroughly so she never thinks of defying me again." That Satsuki-san was seriously scary.

B-but! I don't think it'll be like that this time!? Probably! Because Satsuki-san's way of saying it was wrong!

Lucie-chan held her head like she'd been caught in a downpour.

"Ugh... if Satsuki comes for revenge... Satsuki is scary when she fights... She's super strong..."

"Lucie-chan, you've fought with Satsuki-san before..."

That's some serious courage...

"Yes... When Lucie drew on her face as a prank, she clipped Lucie's cheeks with clothespins..."

"You drew on Satsuki-san's face!?"

That's way too fearless! If I did that, she'd hunt me down through seven reincarnations and drag me to hell!

"When Lucie cut her bangs without permission because she thought it would suit her, Satsuki didn't talk to her for about five days..."

"You cut Satsuki-san's bangs without permission!?!?"

I shuddered. Just imagining such a scene would give me nightmares for life. It's more terrifying than any gore-filled horror movie.

Compared to that, slapping her cheek isn't so bad, right? If you wanted to, you could probably make up as early as tomorrow.

"W-well! If Mai and Satsuki-san are still angry, I'll go apologize with you! Okay!?"

I forced the most unreliable smile possible.

"...Renako-sama."

Tightly.

Lucie-chan hugged me.

Mm...

I could feel her soft body and warm temperature.

But... I wonder why. The usual fluttering feeling didn't come. Well, my heart rate was incredibly high from the comment about cutting Satsuki-san's bangs, but...

This is probably because I think of Lucie-chan like a little girl.

A hurt girl who fought with friends, said things she didn't mean, then threw a tantrum.

...Well, anyway, Lucie-chan seems to have calmed down.

"Should we head home soon? Your body will get cold here."

When I said that, Lucie-chan shook her head while still hugging me.

I remembered Lucie-chan wrapped in blankets with red, swollen eyes.

"...Are you lonely?"

Lucie-chan nodded.

"I see."

I laughed lightly and petted Lucie-chan's head.

Her silky long hair felt nice against my palm.

"Then want to go somewhere fun?"

Gently, Lucie-chan looked up and peered at me like checking a parent's mood.

"...Is it okay, Renako-sama?"

"Well, I can keep you company for a little while. I don't think I can just leave Lucie-chan like this."

The origin of this whole situation. I have some responsibility for Lucie-chan's broken engagement too...

But more than that, I didn't want to leave Lucie-chan all alone.

Being alone in an apartment in a foreign country after fighting with friends you loved—I'd go crazy if that were me.

"Then!"

Lucie-chan finally smiled.

Still hugging me, her voice bounced with excitement.

"There's somewhere Lucie has wanted to go once."

Oh.

"Sounds good, let's go."

"At times like this, you've got to go out and have fun!"

Playing along, I laughed playfully too.

"Yeah yeah!"

"Then let's go!"

"Wooh!"

I'll go anywhere if it cheers Lucie-chan up!

Laughing, we held hands, caught a taxi partway, and headed to our destination.

—But!

"Hey!"

As soon as we arrived at the establishment and were shown to our seats, I raised my voice at Lucie-chan sitting diagonally across from me.

"What is this place!?"

"What do you mean?"

Lucie-chan tilted her head like an innocent doll with no sense of right and wrong, then showed me an absolutely innocent smile.

"It's a cabaret club!"

"But why!?"

The mood changed way too much!

I should have noticed before entering the store... Pulled along by Lucie-chan's hand, I stepped into the gaudy interior and was shown to our seats...

Inside was dimly lit, with glass chandeliers hanging from the low ceiling.

Smoke-tinted mirrors covered the walls, giving it a wonderland-like atmosphere.

Glamorously dressed ladies approached us as we sat on the gently curved sofa...

"Eh? Two girls? Aww, how cute~"

"Oh my. What brings you here today?"

Lucie-chan smiled cheerfully and raised one hand.

"We came to have fun!"

"I see, I see. Well then, let's have fun~"

"Yes!"

I was frozen solid like a Shigaraki tanuki statue...

"Why... did it come to this..."

Lucie-chan happily spread out the menu while turning an innocent smile toward me.

"What will Renako-sama drink!?"

You're way too excited! What's with this girl!? You were bawling your eyes out just a minute ago!

Gasp... Without realizing it, I was thinking such harsh things about such a cute Lucie-chan...! No, that was just the Youko-chan in my heart shouting...!

I forced a fake smile and tried to look at the menu together.

"Um, well~ Let's see~...!"

"Oh, I heard that it's proper manners to order Dom Pérignon at places like this! Can we have Dom Pérignon!?"

Heyyyy! I don't really know, but that's probably alcohol, right!?

I leaned toward Lucie-chan and whispered urgently.

"We're minors...!?"

"But in France, drinking is allowed from age 16."

"This is Japan!"

Then the lady tilted her head slightly.

"Minors? Did you just say minors?"

"Um, well, um..."

"If you're minors, I'll have to ask you to leave..."

"No, Lucie is twenty."

She lied so boldly!

The lady breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, I see."

With Lucie-chan's beauty and figure, people would believe she was over twenty... Only her way of speaking was childish...

"What about that girl?"

"Ah, uh, ah..."

My eyes spun around.

If I got caught being a minor here...

The school would be notified, and by the next day rumors of 'the girl who went to a cabaret club' would spread through Ashigaya High, and I'd live the rest of my life being whispered about...

That's not all. Having girlfriends like Mai and Ajisai-san while playing around with women at a cabaret club would earn me extremely harsh looks from them.

'...While you have me, how awful of you, Renako.'

'That's terrible, Rena-chan... You prefer mature older ladies over me...'

N-no.

That's not it! I was just dragged here by Lucie-chan! Even as I shouted that, they'd press me with 'But you did go, right?' and I could only nod tearfully...

The abandoned Amaori Renako would spend her life shut in her room, clinging to happy memories of high school...!

I flashed a hopeless, weak smile along with a peace sign.

"O-of course~ I'm a college student~..."

"Well then, enjoy yourselves today."

The lady smiled brightly.

"Haha, hahahaha..."

Was I about to fall into hopeless ruin by going along with Lucie-chan? I felt like I was being strangled by that thought.

"Then let's order Dom Pérignon, Dom Pérignon!"

You've got some personality!

I grabbed the wrist of Lucie-chan, who had become completely giddy.

"No! We can't drink alcohol! Right, Lucie-chan?"

"But in France—"

"Right!?"

"Y-yes."

Finally Lucie-chan nodded too. My feelings got through. If we drank alcohol on top of this, the 0.1% chance of clemency would become absolutely zero...

"Well then, we have orange juice and mocktails... non-alcoholic cocktails too~?"

"Please give us those!"

As I bowed my head, Lucie-chan ordered the same thing.

Furthermore, Lucie-chan said:

"Please order whatever you ladies like from the menu too."

"Eh~ Really~?"

"Yes. Lucie has lots of money."

The ladies happily ordered drinks. Eh, why do we have to order for the staff too...!?

And Lucie-chan, aren't you a bit too used to this!?

"I hate to think it, but Lucie-chan, you're not a regular at places like this, are you...?"

My whole view of you is about to change dramatically...!

Lucie-chan looked smug.

"This is my first time visiting for fun. However, I have heard. In Japan, when adults get stressed, they come to cabaret clubs!"

"That's probably a stereotype!"

"I learned it from Yakuza: Like a Dragon!"

"Don't take seriously a game where salarymen randomly punch yakuza on the street!"

As we argued, the lady sitting with us giggled.

"You two get along well. College friends?"

"Oh, no...! How should I put it, we're gaming friends!"

"I see. Do you play a lot at home? Games?"

"Haha... yes, well..."

As I nodded vaguely.

The lady sitting next to me moved closer. Eh!?

"What kind of games do you like?"

She was wearing a dress with an open neckline, so her, um, cleavage was right in my field of vision, making me look away reflexively.

"Ah, ahaha, w-well! Mainly games where you shoot people with guns!"

"FPS~? I play those quite a bit at home too~"

"R-really!? What a coincidence!"

The lady stayed close to me while actively chatting about various things.

She listened to my clumsy game talk with smiles and big nods of "I see~!" looking very entertained.

Ugh... The sweet scent of perfume...! I wonder what this is, rose...!? I don't know, but it's making my heart pound.

Don't be fooled, me! She's only doing this as part of her job! It's not like she likes me or anything!

"Is this your first time at a place like this?"

"Y-yes... I'm nervous...!"

"Ahaha. How cute~"

The lady closed the distance between us, which had been about a fist's width apart.

Why!?

"Come on, since you're here, let's have fun? Right?"

"!?"

The lady's knee gently touched mine. Eek! Accident!? Or intentional!?

Could this be more than just... customer service!?

The BGM in the store was relaxed R&B, but I couldn't calm down at all. My heart's BPM was over 200!

"Hey hey, my name is Rin, but what should I call you?"

"Eh? Um...!"

This is bad. Just the sense of crisis that giving my real name would be problematic kicked in.

I squeezed out:

"Ha..."

"Ha?"

"Haruna... is fine."

Before I knew it, I had given a fake name...

N-no, your honor! I didn't have any guilty feelings!

Five jurors in my head: Mai, Satsuki-san, Ajisai-san, Kaho-chan, and Haruna. All five raised their cards at once. Death penalty, death penalty, death penalty, death penalty, death penalty. Unanimous death penalty!

That's not it! I just got dragged into this by Lucie-chan! My motivation was kindness! I couldn't leave Lucie-chan alone when she was depressed and lonely! It was goodwill! This is innocent by reason of goodwill!

"Well then, Haruna-chan. Cheers♡"

"Ch-cheers~!"

Drinks were brought over. Clinking glass against glass, I—having impersonated my sister's name—wore a smile that looked ready to die.

The lady pressed her glossy lips to her glass and swallowed. Then she smiled brightly.

"Mm, delicious. Thanks for the treat, Haruna-chan."

"Ah, ahahaha!"

She winked along with her thanks, and all I could do was laugh.

What!? Does this person like me!?

I hurriedly brought the drink to my lips, but could only feel its coldness. My five senses had gone stupid.

"How is it?"

"It's delicious!"

"Hehe."

The lady's hand was now placed on my thigh.

!?!?

Peering into my face with a smile, her eyes held an alluring color.

"Feels like... an adult taste?"

Help me, Lucie-chan! This person likes me!

I looked pleadingly toward Lucie-chan. Receiving similar customer service from another lady, Lucie-chan's emotional state had become completely bizarre.

"My engagement was broken off! Waaaah! Lucie is, Lucie is!"

Tears poured from her eyes as she was comforted by the lady next to her.

"That's terrible!"

"That's right! It's too terrible!"

"Poor Lucie-chan!"

"Waaa, poor Lucie...! Waaaaah..."

Now she was clinging to the lady's knees, crying. Even though she hadn't had any alcohol... What is this girl... what is this girl!?

Help me, Youko-chan! Right now I can understand Youko-chan's struggles not with 'words' but with my 'heart'!

"Alright, I get it, let's drink, Lucie-chan! I'll keep you company all the way tonight!"

"Waaaah~! Another round~!"

Actually... somehow, Lucie-chan looks more cheerful than when I comforted her on that hill earlier... More than with me, her friend...

Well, there are things you can talk about with strangers that you can't with people you know... I understand that. I understand, but...

Is this the magic power of cabaret clubs...?

I was gradually getting tired of thinking.

Why have I been acting all 'I'm the normal one~' and flustering around this whole time? Isn't this fine already? I tried my best... yeah.

Let me put down this baggage called common sense...

...Alright, since it's Lucie-chan's treat anyway! I drained my mocktail with its strong fresh lime flavor and floating mint, then put the glass on the table.

"Rin-san! I'd like another drink too!"

"Oh, nice. Good drinking style."

"Since we're here! This is life experience too!"

"That's right~"

The lady laughed with twinkling eyes while nodding along. I felt like the stress I'd been accumulating recently was being healed...

Ahh, wonderful... Rin-san doesn't deny me...

This is a relationship connected by money...! Money really is the best...!

"Who's the king~"

The party was in full swing. Rolling chopsticks between her palms to mix them up, Lucie-chan held out the blunt ends toward us.

I had no idea how the conversation had gotten to this point, but somehow a King's Game had started.

Having given up on thinking, I smiled and pulled out a chopstick.

Oh... I'm the king!

"It's me~☆"

'Yay~'

Scattered applause. I looked back and forth between the beautiful, sexy ladies and Lucie-chan, thinking of a command. Hehehe, what should I make them do☆

"Well then~ Numbers 1 and 2~ should praise the king~☆"

Lucie-chan and Rin-san raised their hands.

"Then excuse me."

"Hehehe."

"Eh, eh?"

Lucie-chan and Rin-san moved seats to sit on either side of me.

As I waited nervously, they brought their faces close to my ears.

"Renako-sama, I love you♡"

"!?"

"Haruna-chan, you're so cute♡"

"!?!?"

By the way, Lucie-chan stubbornly kept calling me 'Renako,' but Rin-san properly called me 'Haruna' without letting that slip—she was definitely a professional.

That aside!

"Thanks to Renako-sama, today was really fun."

"Please come again. I'll be waiting. It was so much fun♡"

"Renako-sama is Lucie's benefactor... Lucie adores you...♡"

"Ah, your face is getting all red. So cute♡"

Hawawawawa...

Brain-melting voices from both sides...!

After being whispered to like that for a while, both of them simultaneously:

Made a 'chu' sound.

Soft sensation on my cheeks.

I had been kissed.

Uwaaaaaaaaaaaah!

I lay down on the sofa and writhed around.

"That's too stimulating!"

"Ahahaha."

Rin-san laughed with narrowed eyes.

This is the King's Game... what a terrifying devil's game...

"Next then! Next!"

Lucie-chan, who still hadn't been king once, gathered the chopsticks and held them out again.

Hah, hah... For a moment I almost came to my senses... Close call.

At my limit, I pulled out a chopstick with trembling fingers. This time, number 3.

Once everyone had drawn, Lucie-chan announced with obvious barely-contained excitement:

"The king is~! Yes, it's Lucie!"

The long-awaited Lucie-chan opened her mouth with an innocent smile.

"Number 3~!"

My heart skipped. That's me.

As if she'd already decided on the command, Lucie-chan proclaimed loudly:

"Let the king suck your chest!"

"No way!"

I shouted with the force of snapping chopsticks in half. The table erupted in laughter for some reason. I'm not doing that!?

And so my first cabaret club experience ended in complete chaos.

But the really difficult part was yet to come…

Here's the translation following the style guide from the reference:

Supporting the staggering Lucie-chan by the shoulder, we left the shop.

"Y-you really didn't drink any alcohol, right?"

"Ugh... Renako-sama..."

"Are you okay...?"

After settling the bill with her gleaming black card, Lucie-chan took a few steps and then went completely limp again. S-so heavy...!

Even though she was slender, Lucie-chan was about 10 centimeters taller than me. Carrying her all the way to her apartment like this would be quite difficult.

The night had grown completely dark. I hadn't noticed before, but we were in an entertainment district.

"We need to at least get to the main street to catch a taxi..."

"...Renako-sama..."

"Y-yeah. Just bear with it a little longer, Lucie-chan. Can you walk...?"

"..."

Then Lucie-chan, who I was supporting, turned those big eyes toward me from close range. Ugh... so beautiful...

"Wh-what...?"

A faint voice reached me.

"...Shall we rest, just a little bit?"

"That means..."

Right, we were surrounded by an entertainment district.

Which means.

I turned my face sideways. There was an adult-oriented lodging facility with both overnight and rest rates posted.

"Eh!?"

My cheeks instantly grew hot.

"Um, well!"

"..."

With what little remaining rational thought I had left, I almost threw Lucie-chan away and cried out. But Lucie-chan showed no reaction.

Ugh... Could this actually be really bad...!?

After such a long day with so many different things happening, Lucie-chan had exhausted both her physical and mental energy, like a kindergartener with dead batteries...

...Th-this is... helping someone...

Helping someone, right...!?

I didn't even know who I was asking. Maybe I asked the stars, but the winter night sky gave me no answer.

"...O-okay."

"...Mm..."

Dragging along Lucie-chan, who could barely manage a groan, I headed to the nearby adult-oriented lodging facility.

Am I finally getting stuck in a real quagmire...!?

***

After putting Lucie-chan to bed, I went to run a bath.

...I never thought the experience from the after-party with Kaho-chan and the photo shoot would come in handy...

I was even able to choose a room smoothly... No, that's not it... This is just accumulating life experience, you know...? It's proof that Amaori Renako is growing...

Frozen with pottery wheel-like hand movements, I looked down at Lucie-chan sinking into the big bed, not knowing who I was making excuses to.

This time it was a room with a fluffy rug at the foot of the bed. Soft indigo color scheme. The walls were unified in matte black, giving the room a luxurious atmosphere.

Compared to the room I visited last time, it had a somehow calmer feeling. Yet the panel attached to the queen-size bed was shining silver and seemed out of place, and the bathroom was completely visible from the room through glass walls. Definitely not a normal hotel...!

When I had nothing to do, I felt like the demon called 'sanity' would catch up to me, making me restless... I wanted to do something, something normal...

That's right... At least let me hang Lucie-chan's coat on a hanger... It looks expensive... Look how normal, so normal...

"Excuse me~..."

I tried to gently remove Lucie-chan's jacket without forcibly waking her. Then Lucie-chan, who was sleeping on her side with her knees drawn up, moved her lips slightly.

"Renako-sama..."

"Yes yes, I'm right here~"

I spoke to reassure her. Lucie-chan obediently listened.

First I pulled out her right arm, then drew out her left arm... Good, coat retrieval complete.

But.

"Mmm..."

"...Eh?"

When I came back after hanging it up, Lucie-chan had slowly raised herself and put both hands up in a banzai pose.

That means...

"...Renako-sama."

Half-asleep Lucie-chan urged me on with a sweet voice.

...She wants me to undress her!?

Wait wait wait! This is a hotel! Two young women! Undressing each other!? That's an unforgivable great sin!

Impure thoughts reflexively welled up, and I tried to keep my wits about me.

No no no, Lucie-chan's emotional state is like a kindergartener's, so it's nothing! Even I'm not the type of woman who thinks 'how lewd...' about just anyone!

I judge whether something is lewd or not extremely objectively based on composite factors like mood, expressions, tone of voice, skin exposure, and physical contact. If someone went around saying 'Hmm, lewd! lol' to everyone in the world, I think they should be arrested early!

So when I properly look at Lucie-chan with those eyes.

She's incredibly beautiful, and despite having princess-like looks, her powerless sitting on a hotel bed is immoral, her shining hair reflects the light creating an somehow lascivious atmosphere, and her dress hem is rolled up exposing her thighs which is incredibly—

—Well! It's not! Lewd at all!

That was getting dangerous. I forcibly cut off my thoughts.

Probably Lucie-chan usually has Youko-chan help her change clothes. So this is just an ordinary, everyday scene for Lucie-chan.

I decided to empty my mind. It's not like I'm feeling lewd at all, but just in case, you know, just in case. Should I empty it just to be safe? Like that. Go with nothingness? Like that.

And in that state of nothingness, I pulled off Lucie-chan's casual dress like pulling up a big turnip.

Pure white, smooth skin was exposed before my eyes. When faced with something incredibly beautiful, people's hearts should pound, but since I was in a state of nothingness, it was nothing to me. Amaori Renako isn't here. There's only nothingness in human form.

The dress retained Lucie-chan's warmth, and I could sense her lingering scent...

—It was nothing to me!

I folded it neatly and put it on the table! Mission complete! Dismissed!

But that wasn't the end.

"Mm..."

Lucie-chan still wasn't moving. Her back still turned toward me.

Hmm...?

Lucie-chan was now in her underwear. Before me was the back clasp of a black bra with delicate embroidery.

...That too!?

Well! This is also just one page of an ordinary, everyday scene! I can do this! After all, we're just gaming friends! And I'm in a state of nothingness right now!

With trembling fingertips, I unhooked Lucie-chan's bra clasp.

A trophy notification popped up in the upper right of my vision. I had unlocked the achievement of undressing a girl's underwear for the first time in my life.

Lucie-chan wriggled to remove the shoulder straps. It was nothing really... Well, I put on a bra every morning too... Actually, I learned for the first time that taking it off is easier than putting it on. Though my fingers are still trembling...

But for the third time.

When Lucie-chan turned toward me on the bed, she extended her legs together toward me.

Lucie-chan was now topless, wearing only panties.

"Mm."

In other words, that too...?

...

I climbed onto the bed and sat down in front of Lucie-chan.

Then, as I reached my fingers toward her panties...

I am nothingness. I am nothingness...? What exactly is nothingness... Uggggh...

As I reached out...

My hand toward Lucie-chan's pure white skin. Just as I was about to touch her soft groin area.

Yup!

Can't do it! (※No freaking way I can do it!)

I forcibly pulled Lucie-chan's arms.

"Alright! Let's take a bath! Lucie-chan, we're taking a bath!? We're taking a bath so you need to undress yourself! Okay!"

"...Fai."

Pulling the drained Lucie-chan's hand, we headed determinedly to the bathroom.

No matter how kindergarten-level her emotions are, Lucie-chan's appearance is that of a peerless beauty! There's no way I could do it!

Lucie-chan sank up to her shoulders in the large, bowl-shaped bathtub.

"Phew..."

Looking down at that scene, I felt accomplished.

Youko-chan probably takes care of things like this regularly. My sympathy for Youko-chan continued to grow boundlessly.

Just from accompanying Lucie-chan for one day, I'd been swung around like a morning star and was completely worn out physically and mentally...

Days like this, every day...

You worked hard, Youko-chan... You're admirable... You're a model maid... Even biting my body was because you were stressed, right,

yeah... I forgive you now... If it's okay with me, you can bite me as much as you want... Sorry, that's a lie.

"Renako-sama..."

"Mm."

I turned around at the weak voice.

Lucie-chan was looking up at me like a wet cat.

"...Won't you join me?"

"...Mmmm."

I furrowed my brow for a while.

Bath... a bath, huh.

How is that... Is that cheating... or not cheating...?

I reflected on my life. When I bathed with Kaho-chan, I wasn't dating Mai and Ajisai-san yet. Hanatori-san just scrubbed my body, and with Youko-chan it was force majeure...

This time it's a pattern where I can relatively decide whether to get in or not by my own will...

Among those choices, if I choose the 'get in' option, it would feel unfair to Mai and Ajisai-san...

...H-how about it?

But (the Mai in my heart) quietly shook her head.

'Please take care of Lucie, Renako. Be kind to her.'

...R-right.

I can't really push away Lucie-chan, who's lost her place and thinks Mai and Satsuki-san hate her...

Ajisai-san (in my heart) also gently nodded, saying 'That's right.' Yeah yeah. Ajisai-san really is kind.

...But really? Lately I feel like Ajisai-san has been directing somewhat complex feelings toward me...

Let me ask more carefully. I-is it okay? Ajisai-san.

The Ajisai-san in my heart smiled warmly and brightly.

'...Yeah, I think it's fine.'

That felt like quite a long pause!?

"...Renako-sama?"

Ugh...! I went to the washing area and took off my top.

Sorry, Ajisai-san... I'll definitely make up for this! Definitely!

Just for now... please close those cute little eyes!

After undressing and quickly washing my body with the shower, I sat down next to Lucie-chan...

Taking a bath alone with a friend... This is one moment I never feel like I'll get used to. Well, if I got used to it, I think it'd be over...

"..."

Silence echoed in the steamy bathroom.

Lucie-chan had been clinging tightly to my arm like a small child hugging a teddy bear.

Which means Lucie-chan's chest was pressing firmly against my upper arm.

F-friends...!!

Lucie-chan leaned against my shoulder with absolutely no impure thoughts. Ugh... She's really close...

Why does a girl's skin feel so pleasant when you touch it...

Everywhere is soft and warm...

Even without attachment or romantic feelings, it makes my emotions surge. Almost enough to make me misunderstand something...

Discomfort, ticklishness, and just a little bit of comfort.

Lucie-chan murmured.

"I'm sorry about today."

"U-um."

"For dragging you around in various ways."

That's absolutely true! Because of Lucie-chan, I had my first cabaret club experience...!

But somehow... I didn't feel like simply saying 'That's right'... I put on an ambiguous smile.

"W-well, I think it's fine...! When you're about to become self-destructive, having a friend who'll keep you company is something to be grateful for."

When I was worrying about how to answer Mai and Ajisai-san's confessions, Kaho-chan kept me company in various ways, which is why I can still be living like this.

If someone needs me, I want to help them too.

I think that's how the world goes around.

"Renako-sama..."

Lucie-chan said in a voice that seemed deeply moved.

"Won't you marry me?"

"—Uweh!?"

A scream involuntarily escaped. Th-this is too much need!

I turned to see the wet-eyelashed beauty right next to me.

Eyes like amethyst steadily reflected me.

"...Would you hate it? Becoming family with Lucie..."

"Ah, um...!"

I involuntarily swallowed my words.

I understood. There wasn't a speck of joking in Lucie-chan's tone. She might just be hurt with tunnel vision, clinging to someone nearby who's being kind... but in this moment, Lucie-chan was undoubtedly serious.

So I have to answer seriously too... But what should I say...

Saying 'Sure, sounds good! Let's do it!' as if it were a joke would be the easiest way to get through this situation, but it would be the worst possible choice...

"And so I ended up marrying Lucie-chan! (lol)" If I reported that to Mai and Ajisai-san, they'd push me off the rooftop and coordinate their stories to commit the perfect crime.

But if I answered 'Impossible,' I'd hurt Lucie-chan again!

No. I want the world to stop entrusting me with choices. All of this is because I got cocky and said 'I'll steer my own life! lol'...! Sorry God! I won't say things like that anymore! Please forgive me!

I decided on a third option—stalling for time.

"W-well, to begin with, girls can't marry each other in Japan!?"

"? You can in France."

Lucie-chan said it like it was perfectly natural. Well, of course! Otherwise she wouldn't use the word 'fiancée' in the first place!

With a forced, artificial smile plastered on, I asked back.

"Do you like me, Lucie-chan?"

"I like you."

Lucie-chan declared it decisively.

A direct confession straight on! My heart was shot through!

Amaori Renako, age 15! Death!

"But—"

No, I was alive... Close call, barely survived with just a fatal wound...

Lucie-chan looked down there.

"I like everyone who stays by my side."

Lucie-chan murmured as if it were something very lonely.

"I like Mai and Satsuki because they were my very first friends. I like Renée because she gave me a place to belong. I like Youko because she stays with me. I like Renako-sama because you're kind. I think Lucie would be happier than now no matter who she married."

As I thought, the feelings Lucie-chan directs toward me aren't romantic.

Well... it's not like you have to have romantic feelings to get married... If both people can acknowledge that value system...

"...Renako-sama."

Lucie-chan's skin pressed against me urged me to choose.

Ugh...

Even as I was almost completely distracted, I voiced my true feelings.

"Um... you know, I... like Lucie-chan too... as a friend."

Lucie-chan's face didn't light up at those words I added like an excuse.

"I'd never had a friend I could talk about games with, so I was happy to meet Lucie-chan. We just met, but I feel like Lucie-chan and I could become much closer friends."

It's really difficult to talk about important things while thinking about what you want to say and how the other person will feel if you say it.

"I want to keep being friends with Lucie-chan from now on... That's all my true feelings."

But.

"But... I can't marry Lucie-chan."

This was completely different from rejecting Mai and Satsuki-san's words about marriage. I was really scared of hurting Lucie-chan, who was still earnestly waiting for my answer.

Still, if what we're both seeking is at cross-purposes, I have to tell her.

That's surely what it means to face someone seriously.

"Because I have someone I love."

Lucie-chan didn't look away and asked back.

"More than Lucie?"

What a cruel question!

Ugh... I don't want to rank anyone... But I can't dodge this by saying 'I like you both the same amount!'...

"Yeah... Sorry..."

My sense of guilt swelled and I couldn't help adding that unnecessary 'sorry.' If I'm going to apologize, I shouldn't have refused in the first place! The sharpness of the knife stabbing me increased...

Lucie-chan nodded slightly as if she'd known all along.

"I see."

The knife's point wavered and turned toward Lucie-chan.

...Because Lucie-chan likes Mai and Satsuki-san more than me too, right?

Maybe I should have said that defiantly. But I couldn't. I just fell silent.

Lucie-chan changed position. She buried her face in my chest from the front.

Wait, that's...!

Pretty embarrassing. Clinging tightly to me, Lucie-chan murmured:

"Then, as a concubine..."

"Wait!?"

Stop presenting me with third options!? I already chose something similar once before!

"Hehe, just kidding."

"Really? Really?"

Making jokes at this timing shows some real character, Lucie-chan... She has a different type of devilish woman attribute from Kaho-chan...

Alternating between serious and joking, my emotions are completely messed up...

In the silence that fell again.

"...Maman..."

Still clinging to me, Lucie-chan spoke wistfully.

...Lucie-chan who said she had no family and was lonely.

My chest tightened.

What must it feel like to go home every day to an empty room with no one there? I can't really imagine the harsh fate that Lucie-chan, not much different in age from me, carries.

Isn't there some way for all of us to be happy?

I always end up empathizing with everyone. This probably isn't a good thing.

...I want Lucie-chan to be happy too.

Yeah.

I let my words slip out.

"Hey, Lucie-chan. If you really had nowhere to go..."

I put my arms around the back of Lucie-chan who looked up at me.

As if accepting those feelings.

"When that time comes, um... Eventually, as friends, want to share an apartment? We might not be able to stay together forever... but maybe it would make you a little less lonely."

"...Renako-sama."

Beautiful eyes sparkled, reflecting light.

...What should I do? I said it on impulse.

Maybe sometime there really will be an opportunity to properly introduce Lucie-chan to Mai and Ajisai-san...

But somehow, just somehow.

I felt like that future wouldn't come.

Lucie-chan pressed closer to me.

"...I really do love you. Renako-sama is so kind."

"Mm..."

"If I had a maman, I think... she would have been kind to me like this."

I suddenly became a mother!?

I had a big sister, but such a big daughter would be completely overwhelming... Plus, she's too beautiful to be my daughter...

"I'll think about it more... slowly. What Lucie really wants to do..."

"...Mm."

Lucie-chan smiled shyly, just a little.

"If the result is that what I really want to do is blow up Queen Rose, then please help me again."

"Nn! Hard to say yes!"

At my cry, Lucie-chan giggled.

"Hehehe."

This time, as if truly reassured, Lucie-chan buried her face in my chest.

And then—

"—!?"

I involuntarily writhed.

Wait!

Covering my chest with both hands, I cried out with my whole body.

"Lucie-chan!? Did you just suck on my chest!?"

Lucie-chan whimpered sweetly.

"Maman~"

"Hey!?"

Amaori Renako, age 15.

For the first time in her life, she unlocked the achievement of having her breasts sucked—.

After that... we rested a bit and left the hotel.

Then Youko-chan (!?) who had been waiting outside collected Lucie-chan and took her home.

Apparently she'd been following us all day. Since taking care of Lucie-chan was her job, after all.

She could have helped out partway through...!

Seeing my face that clearly had a lot to say, Youko-chan promised to make it up to me later. Really now... really now...!

And one more thing.

What Lucie-chan decided was what she "really wanted to do" would greatly change the fate of me, Mai, and Satsuki-san... but that's a story for a little further ahead.

*** ***

Bedroom. Sitting on the large bed in her home, Oduka Mai stared into the darkness.

The door opened. Light filtered in faintly as Koto Satsuki entered.

"Still bothering you?"

"...Mm."

Satsuki sat next to Mai, who gave an ambiguous response.

Wrapped in a bathrobe, Satsuki dried her wet hair with a bath towel.

"We decided this together."

As if opening a heavy mouth, Mai murmured.

"Deceiving Mama, and even hurting Lucie."

No trace remained on Satsuki's slapped cheek. While there was no doubt Lucie had been serious in that moment, she probably couldn't bring herself to truly strike Satsuki hard.

"That's right. But you still want to be with that woman, don't you?"

"..."

Mai's eyes wavered.

Seeing this, Satsuki frowned slightly.

"That's your 'love,' isn't it?"

"Satsuki, I—"

As if crushing Mai's attempted words.

"What? Or are you giving up?"

When she looked over, Mai stared back at her.

A serious expression filled with strong will.

"If that's what you want, I wouldn't mind. If you say that mere love isn't worth deceiving family and hurting a childhood friend."

At those words, Mai:

"...That's right, yes."

She clasped her hands together in front of her chest.

Words of determination overflowed.

"The moment I involved you, I could only move forward. Following my heart's call. To fulfill my own wishes."

"..."

I see. Still only that much.

Satsuki lit a dark flame in the depths of her eyes.

Are you that intoxicated with yourself for being in love?

Then more.

Piling up many difficulties and sacrifices ahead on this path—.

Satsuki stroked Mai's cheek.

"Mai."

Calling that name she'd called thousands, tens of thousands of times since childhood.

Drawing her face closer.

Mai didn't look away.

She just called back.

"Satsuki."

That voice was strangely gentle.

As if accepting all of her.

"...!"

As if repelled, Satsuki pushed Mai's shoulders.

Mai fell back onto the bed. Satsuki looked down at Mai, covering her.

"Since we're fiancées."

Satsuki spoke with an expression like biting her lower lip.

"We should do at least this much, or we'll surely be suspected."

If told she had to offer her body as well, what kind of face would Mai show? Satsuki just wanted to know that.

But—

"...I see."

Mai's eyes, lying on her back, reflected Satsuki.

"I understand."

—I understand.

...I understand?

Does that mean it's fine?

You're dating that woman, aren't you?

Yet you don't mind if I steal your lips? Is that your determination toward 'love'?

—You would go that far?

Mai, who had been looking up at Satsuki, closed her eyes as if entrusting even her heart.

—Her pulse was disturbed.

She felt like she could hear her heart creaking from within.

"...Fine then."

She turned away.

"That was just testing your feelings. If your heart is that decided, you won't slip up."

Standing up, she tried to leave Mai's room with the excuse of blow-drying her hair.

A voice called from behind.

"Satsuki."

Satsuki stopped.

But didn't turn around.

"I'm grateful to you."

—At words that seemed to see through even her heart.

"Disgusting."

Satsuki left a murmur resembling spitting and exited the room.

Chapter 3: There's No Freaking Way Three People Can Date! (※It Actually Worked!)

"So then~"

Ajisai-san clapped her hands half-heartedly and announced with a somewhat jaded smile.

"First meeting of the 'Let's Console Me and Rena-chan Who Got Dumped by Mai-chan Society'~ Yay~"

"That's what this meeting was!?"

And right next to us was the person in question.

"Well well... what a predicament."

Mai smiled like someone fondly exasperated by a beloved pet dog.

Is this okay!? Isn't there tension from the get-go!?

—This won't do. Walking between the two of them, I raised my index finger to lighten the mood with an extra-large joke.

"Yeah... you're having a real *Mai-jor* problem!"

My voice echoed emptily.

...Huh? Didn't they hear me?

"A *Mai-jor* problem... right!?"

Both Ajisai-san and Mai showed no reaction.

"Well, you see... you said 'what a predicament' so... that's why, um, 'Mai-jor'... like 'major' but with your name Mai... it's a double meaning, you know...?"

... ... Should I just die?

"So then, Mai-chan."

Ajisai-san cleared her throat and moved the conversation along as if nothing had happened. Amaori Renako, survival route—.

"Today we're going to spoil you lots and lots, so be prepared!"

Ajisai-san pointed at Mai cutely but firmly.

Mai put her hand to her chest and smiled gracefully.

"Of course. I'm sorry for making you both so anxious. And thank you for creating this opportunity to make up for it, Ajisai."

Oh, there was no tension at all. I was the only one who was overwhelmed (death).

Right. Today was a date with all three of us—Mai, Ajisai-san, and me.

At first we talked about redoing our amusement park date that Mai couldn't attend due to work, but Mai herself said that since she'd caused us both worry this time, she wanted to plan the date content herself.

So today's escort was Mai.

We'd already talked things through with Mai about the recent incident with Lucie-chan (including Satsuki-san). We decided to leave Lucie-chan alone for a while. Our views matched! Good. Satsuki-san also seemed (on the surface) not too angry, which was a relief.

So we were leisurely walking through Tokyo's streets in early December.

Somehow, going out with just the three of us felt like it had been a really long time.

We hadn't had time to rest lately...

Both Mai and Ajisai-san had already switched to winter clothes—Mai in her elegant long coat and Ajisai-san fluffy in her flare coat both embodied beauty and cuteness. So wonderful to look at.

Oh, I'm wearing the duffle coat I bought in middle school. I don't have money to buy new winter clothes... When my next allowance comes in (and if there aren't any games I want), maybe...!

"So where are we headed?"

When I asked, Mai smiled with a "hehehe."

"A wonderful place, of course."

Oh... Mai's usual 'habit' is showing.

I asked Ajisai-san:

"...Where do you think?"

"Hmm... knowing Mai-chan, maybe a super stylish hotel cafe?"

"Still too naive, Ajisai-san."

"Eh?"

I acted like I understood Mai and wagged my finger.

"There's no way it's somewhere ordinary people would imagine. Knowing Mai, she'll definitely exceed our expectations in every way."

"In every way...!"

Ajisai-san clenched her fist and gasped. Mai listened to our conversation with a grin.

"So what's Rena-chan's guess?"

I glanced at Mai's profile. Judging from that suggestive smile...

"A luxury cruise ship tour...!"

"Eh?"

"And then the three of us go on a world trip!"

"What should we do, Rena-chan! I didn't bring my passport!"

"I'm sure that's been arranged too!"

"What about school!?"

"They've arranged for us to take classes online!"

"Waaa!"

As Ajisai-san and I got excited, Mai murmured "I see."

"That's another option. I'll try it next time."

"That would be a problem!?"

"I-I'd also cause trouble if I left home too long..."

"Then we'll invite Ajisai's family too. It's sure to be a fun trip."

"Waaaa..."

Seeing Ajisai-san cry out in admiration, Mai laughed without reservation. The scary thing is she'd probably really do it if she decided to...!

"Money is nice... When you have money, happiness spreads..."

"Of course, there's plenty of happiness that money can't buy."

Mai spread her hands lightly and smiled at Ajisai-san and me.

"For example, no matter how much money I piled up, I couldn't obtain Renako and Ajisai's hearts."

Ajisai-san giggled and agreed, saying "That's right."

But is that really true!

I feel like my heart could be bought with money relatively easily...!? With a PC equipped with the latest graphics card or a full set of gadgets used by professional gamers...!

But saying that would dampen this warm atmosphere, so I just made an agreeing sound like "That's true~." Because it might sound like I decided to date Mai because she's rich...?

That's when it happened.

The recent memory of literally 'happiness bought with money' flashed back in my mind.

The dimly lit store interior. A lady in a dress with an open neckline. Her gorgeous body leaning close, placing her hand on my thigh, with an adult smile bringing her lips to my ear—

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Eh!?"

"R-Renako!?"

I looked back at the two with vacant eyes.

"Eh!? What happened!? Did something just occur!?"

"Eh!?"

"You suddenly screamed..."

"Really!? That happens sometimes! What a surprise!"

Now they're completely looking at me like I'm abnormal.

"M-Mai-chan... What's wrong with Rena-chan...?"

"I don't know... Hey, Renako. If something happened, you can talk to us about it..."

Actually, they're genuinely worried!

"I-I'm totally fine!? Peace peace!"

This is bad. Mai and Ajisai-san don't trust me enough to be fooled by such acting. Rather, because they trust me, they might be convinced something happened.

That's right. Though I hate to say it myself, since we started dating, I've gradually earned their trust. Even though there was a period when I was lost calling them A and B!

If that's the case, rather than suffering while keeping secrets, confessing would be easier. With our current level of trust, surely they'd understand there were circumstances.

Alright.

'Actually, Lucie-chan and I lied about being college students, used my sister's fake name, and went to a cabaret club! We played the King's Game for the first time! After leaving the shop, we went to a hotel together where I undressed her and we took a bath together, but since we're friends it doesn't count, right!'

Hehehe, how about that?

Surely they'd believe there was nothing improper! Right?

Impossible!!

Why, why did it come to this... God, why... The ones I love are Mai and Ajisai-san...

"N-now Rena-chan is silently bumping her head against a telephone pole..."

"And she's smiling too..."

I turned toward them while crying (but smiling with just my mouth).

"Sorry... I can't right now, but... someday, definitely someday, I'll tell you both..."

"Y-yeah..."

"What on earth happened..."

I weakly grabbed both their hands.

So warm... I wish this warmth could sterilize and disinfect my heart too...

By the way, I've been keeping in touch with Lucie-chan since then. Right now she's apparently focused on work she has left to finish in Japan.

Whether she'll stay in Japan from now on is up to Lucie-chan, but I selfishly hope she'll settle down in Japan...

Since we became friends, we could go to cabaret clubs together again☆

Just kidding!?

Close call. I'm starting to not know which thoughts are my real feelings. Have I really broken down...? Can I never go back to how I was...?

"Uu, Mai, Ajisai-san... Please hit me. Strike my cheek with all your strength... If you two don't hit me, I don't even have the right to embrace you..."

"Why Run, Melos...?"

"...It seems something really serious happened."

Mai nodded to Ajisai-san.

"Well then, shall we do it together?"

"You're really going to hit her!?"

"If Renako stays like this all day, this won't be a date."

"Th-that's true, but..."

Mai's hand reached out suddenly.

So abruptly!?

Even though I asked for it myself, I wasn't prepared at all when Mai—squeezed my cheek with a "squish."

"Ow."

"Hehehe. Come on, Ajisai too."

"Y-yeah... S-sorry...?"

Ajisai-san gently pinched my other cheek.

Then both released their fingers simultaneously. Ow.

"A-are you okay?"

I held my stinging cheeks. Hehehe, this pain will bring me back to my senses... The 'punishment' has been delivered. The evil corrupting this body has departed.

"Hehe, hehehehe, thank you... Ah, it hurts... I'm happy..."

"Sh-she's laughing..."

Ajisai-san was completely put off to the end.

Then she whispered to Mai conspiratorially.

"H-hey... If our girlfriend awakens to weird hobbies, what should we do...?"

"When that time comes, we'll have to try our best to understand."

"Uu... O-okay!"

Ajisai-san clenched her fists with determination.

That was incredibly cute, but it's not like that, okay? I didn't become a fan of S&M play or anything...?

Well, I suppose if Ajisai-san kicked me while saying 'Haah... This is why Rena-chan is such a hopeless person...' with Satsuki-san-level verbal abuse, I might awaken to new fetishes...

Actually, I wonder... that would just normally hurt... In that case, wouldn't it be doubly beneficial to have angelic Ajisai-san do something she'd absolutely never normally do, then afterward have her worry about me like 'Rena-chan, I'm sorry, did that hurt...?'...?

"Well, we've arrived."

While I was thinking such sacrilegious thoughts, Mai stopped in front of an unremarkable building.

Ajisai-san continued the earlier joke and looked around.

"This is... it definitely doesn't look like the entrance to a cruise, does it?"

Having completed my purification and returned completely to sanity, I slowly shook my head.

"No no. We can't relax yet, Ajisai-san. There might be a secret passage extending from the building's basement all the way to the harbor."

"That sounds illegal!?"

Guided by a chuckling Mai, we took the elevator to the building's fifth floor. When Mai unlocked and opened the door, what she showed us was yet another unremarkable apartment unit.

A 1LDK with a large kitchen. This is...

"A rental space?"

"Right."

Mai nodded at Ajisai-san's words.

Then, with the charming smile of a beauty excitedly wondering what to do to surprise us with pure goodwill, she announced:

"Today, I thought we'd have a dumpling party together."

"Dumplings."

"A party...!"

In a way, an even more surprising event than a world cruise...!

The dining table already had all the necessary ingredients and seasonings prepared.

"Mai-chan arranged this too?"

As Ajisai-san hung her coat on a hanger and asked, Mai smiled.

"Yes. I was preparing by myself since morning. It was fun."

"Why a dumpling party...?"

It felt wild to ask that question, but I was curious so I couldn't help it.

Mai put her hand to her mouth and said with a cool expression:

"I saw it on TV the other day and wanted to try it."

"..."

That was an incredibly trivial reason.

She sounds like an airheaded extrovert (prejudice)...

But Mai with a trendy, extroverted mindset is undeniably cute... Mai is so cute...

"But then, couldn't we have done this at Mai's house!? Where was the need to rent a space!?"

"This way would be more surprising, right?"

"You're too committed to surprising people!"

But that's Mai's cute point... I guess.

Well, that's right... Mai is cute. Mai is cute...

Imagining Mai enthusiastically preparing for a dumpling party since morning is incredibly heartwarming. Mai is always so earnest... Mai LOVE...

"I've never made dumplings by hand before."

While I was fumbling to take off my coat, Ajisai-san had already washed her hands in the kitchen and was happily arranging ingredients from shopping bags on the table. So efficient!

"Yeah, I'm inexperienced too. I think I prepared everything necessary, but if anything's missing we can go shopping later."

Looking at what was arranged: ground pork, cabbage, Chinese chives, green onions. There were dumpling wrappers too.

"First we make the filling."

"Right. I should have brought an apron from home."

"I prepared aprons for everyone too. Look."

"Wow, so cute~. Then I'll borrow one."

Mai and Ajisai-san laughed harmoniously together while putting on aprons.

Oh... so domestic and cute...! Wait, I need to put on an apron too since I'm working! Fumble, fumble...

"Alright. Mai-chan, what work do you want to do?"

"There's only one cutting board and knife set, so I'll leave the cutting to Ajisai. I'll proceed with other preparations."

"Okay!"

While I struggled with my apron, the two finished their quick coordination. It was decided we'd proceed that way.

Ajisai-san first washed the vegetables with water, and Mai opened the ground pork into a bowl. The two besides me began working.

...This is bad!

I know this feeling... It's the same as during cooking class, wandering around capable girls while waiting for every second to pass!

I don't want to be unemployed! Please give me some work too...!

"U-um! Is there anything I can help with...?"

I asked nervously. Then Ajisai-san would float a mocking smile saying 'Eh? Rena-chan can't do anything, right? lol Just sit there lol'... No! This is my past trauma!

The real angel Ajisai-san rhythmically moved her knife with a "chop chop" while smiling gently.

"Then, I'll entrust Rena-chan with an important job. We're going to make the filling and wrap dumplings now, so please prepare a large plate to arrange lots of dumplings on."

"Understood! Leave it to Renako!"

At Ajisai-san's words that somehow sounded like she was talking to a small child (she probably does this at home), I raised my hand like I was her elementary school little sister.

Ugh, Ajisai-san doesn't leave anyone out... I carried the plates while crying inside. I'd wanted to be in Ajisai-san's group since middle school... If I had been, I would have become even more emotionally dependent on Ajisai-san...

Always going to Ajisai-san during breaks, following behind Ajisai-san 24 hours a day... If Ajisai-san tried to go somewhere alone I'd track her down, and if she got along with other friends I'd demand she only talk with me... becoming that kind of woman...

Terrifying! What an unhealthy story!

I love Ajisai-san, but if that's all there was, it would be the end... I don't want to become someone who conveniently uses others for my own happiness...

But what if the roles were reversed...? If Ajisai-san followed me around 24 hours a day...? I'd be happy! You can depend on me emotionally as much as you want! Right!?

But Ajisai-san (unlike me) lives admirably, so that would absolutely never happen. The end—.

Just as I finished arranging the plates, Ajisai-san gave me the next mission with perfect timing. As expected of Ajisai-san! The angel who rules the kitchen!

"Then next, could you cook some rice?"

"Yes!"

I replied loudly, and then I froze in front of the rice cooker.

... Here I'll reveal a shocking fact.

I have never cooked rice!

Eh... What should I do? Rice... If I concentrate, will it become rice...?

This is bad. Cold sweat started dripping down.

Ugh, I don't want them to find out... I don't want them to know that I'm someone who hasn't cooked rice once in 15 years...! Ajisai-san always cooks for her family... Meanwhile, I just occasionally help my mom...

I am... My mood sank. Ah, I am...

I thought a "dumpling party" would be more fun.

This is more like a "expose and kill the woman who can't cook festival"...!

Or maybe I should pretend my stomach hurts and escape to the bathroom...? Then the rice would surely be cooked by the time I came back... yeah... I wouldn't have to expose my shameful state...

Actually... Isn't my mental tendency to always consider escape as the first move exactly what's shameful...?

Uuu... It's okay, Ajisai-san won't abandon me now... She won't...!

I gathered courage and called out to Ajisai-san who was working.

"U-um. Sorry, I actually have never cooked rice before!"

Ajisai-san stopped her knife and looked up.

"So, um... I'd like you to teach me..."

"Really?"

Ajisai-san smiled.

"Then let's do it together."

"Y-yeah!"

That's right. When you do anything for the first time, it's the first time... there's nothing embarrassing about it! Ajisai-san and Mai wouldn't laugh at me...!

I'm such a petty person who only thinks about making myself look good, so I really hate and struggle with exposing weaknesses... but I think it's better than always running away...!

Ajisai-san washed her hands, took the rice cooker's inner pot, lightly rinsed it with water, and scooped Mai's rice with a measuring cup.

"Hmm, let's cook about 2 cups. Like this, see."

"Y-yes."

"Put water up to the line, wash it like this, and repeat until the wash water isn't white anymore."

Ajisai-san stood behind me and reached her hands forward. Almost like hugging me.

E-eek...

My heart, which had been pounding with shame until now, started pounding for a different reason. I could feel Ajisai-san's body temperature through our aprons...

No, that's not it! I'm going to work hard to upgrade from Amaori Renako who can't cook rice to Amaori Renako who can cook rice! Listen properly to the explanation!

"Yeah, good job, good job... hehe, that's the way, Rena-chan."

Wait!

That's not good! Body temperature is one thing, but whispering in my ear is a lethal dose!

Because Ajisai-san's whisper voice is sexy!

And so we completed our rice washing in a two-person jacket state. Our first joint work, Ajisai-san... hehe... But I don't have time to say such things. I still feel like Ajisai-san's voice is soaked into my eardrums... hah, hah...

A-alright, let's cook it. I pressed the rice cooker's quick cook button. Click.

With this, I successfully cooked rice for the first time in my life...! So I won't forget this memory, maybe I'll try cooking rice at home sometimes too. Mom will probably be surprised. Like, you just washed rice, added the right amount of water, and pressed the rice cooker button, right?

Then Mai came over next to me.

"You looked like you were having quite a lot of fun."

"W-well, yeah!"

I puffed out my chest defiantly.

"Then how about we knead the filling together next?"

"I want to try it!"

Now that I'd cooked rice, I wasn't afraid of anything.

"It's like making hamburgers, right?"

"Oh, have you made them before?"

"No, but!"

Mai laughed as if looking at something endearing. Wh-what?

"Well then, like this... let's mix in the ingredients Ajisai cut for us with the seasonings and knead it."

"Yes!"

After dumping in cabbage, chives, green onions, and various other things, she added some pre-mixed seasoning liquid and Mai plunged her hands right into the ground meat.

The Oduka Mai is making dumplings... What a surreal image...

"Come on, Renako too."

"Y-yeah."

I tried to nervously stick my hands in from the front, flanking the bowl with Mai.

"Not like that, here."

"Eh... eh!?"

This time Mai embraced me from behind!

The same two-person jacket mode as before!?

"I-I can mix meat by myself!"

"No, there's a proper technique. I saw it on TV. Like this, drawing circles, firmly."

"Y-yes...!"

This is bad. Even scenes where I'd normally retort "That can't be right!" I can't refute because I'm overwhelmingly outmatched in knowledge...! I don't know anything about making dumplings...!

Mai wrapped her arms around me from behind, hugging me tight, and said:

"That's right... slowly, gently. Keep going until it gets sticky."

Uuuu...

Mai's whisper voice also seems more sultry than usual, but maybe it's my imagination...!?

While looking at Ajisai-san with lewd eyes is absolutely forbidden, I do look at Mai a little lewdly...! Because Mai is always beautiful, cool, has cute aspects, and we've kissed plenty...!

Plus when I look at Mai lewdly, she notices and gets embarrassed but also seems just a little happy... That's so endearing and torments my brain...

Mai has always said she likes both touching and being touched by someone she loves... So I become conscious of it!

No no! Don't think unnecessary thoughts, Amaori Renako! Right now, to make delicious dumplings, concentrate single-mindedly on kneading the filling!

Mai whispered from behind:

"Good, Renako... That's right, watch your strength. Yeah, you're doing well..."

Could dumpling-making possibly be something lewd...!?

I'm getting completely confused!

As I fell into a state of complete bewilderment:

"Huh? Isn't Rena-chan's face a bit red?"

"Eek!"

Ajisai-san peered into my face! Stop! Don't look at such an impure me!

"I-I don't think so! Maybe the heating is too strong!?"

"I'm actually a bit cold though?"

"Is that so I have a high body temperature I'm sure!"

"Hup."

"!?"

Even Ajisai-san hugged me! Why!?

"I'll mix-mix too!"

"Oh my. Maybe I should have gotten a bigger bowl."

"Hup, hup!"

"Hehehe."

To put it in terms—with Mai and Ajisai-san hugging and sandwiching me, I was like the filling wrapped in dumpling skin. Maybe I'll be cooked piping hot like this—

Dumpling-making really is something lewd, isn't it!?!?

"Haah... I'm so full..."

I slumped deep into my chair.

Not a single dumpling remained on the plate placed before the three of us. The rice I'd deliciously cooked was also completely finished.

The process of each of us wrapping the completed filling in dumpling skins was also fun.

Mai's wrapped dumplings were beautifully shaped like works of art, Ajisai-san's were big and voluminous, and mine were clumsy with skin torn in places.

Being able to tell at a glance whose dumpling was whose was also interesting.

I insisted I'd take responsibility and eat the dumplings I wrapped! But both Mai and Ajisai-san didn't mind and ate them happily.

Having people eat the dumplings I wrapped was... unexpectedly heartwarming.

With these three, even failure wasn't scary. We enjoyed experimenting—adding kimchi, trying cheese—and were completely satisfied.

"The dumpling party... was fun..."

"I'm glad."

Mai, sitting next to me, smiled brightly. No matter how full she was, Mai somehow remained elegant. Maybe her human mechanisms are different.

"Thank you for planning it, Mai-chan."

"You're welcome. But I was the one who wanted to try it. I thought it would surely be fun together with you two."

"Yeah, it was fun."

After laughing like that, Ajisai-san sitting across from me stretched lightly.

"Mm... My stomach hurts from being so full."

"Ahaha, yeah."

Ajisai-san looking pained from being so full is also cute... I wonder if her stomach is sticking out more than usual, all round... Nice, I want to touch it...

...Wait!? Isn't that perverted!?

I imagined Ajisai-san with her stomach showing and shook my head vigorously. Close call. I was saved by not being perverted. I almost became perverted. Phew, somehow I managed...!

I hurriedly changed the subject.

"Actually! Cooking is fun!"

"Right?"

When I stated that mundane observation, Ajisai-san laughed cheerfully.

"Cooking while thinking of someone is always fun."

"Like when Ajisai-san made cheesecake for us before?"

"Yup!"

Watching Ajisai-san narrow her eyes and smile so openly, affection overflowed in me.

So cute... I love her... ♡

Mai interjected with a know-it-all expression.

"Of course, today I cooked the dumplings while thinking of Renako and Ajisai."

"Whoa, Mai's getting competitive!"

"Then I cut the cabbage while thinking of Rena-chan and Mai-chan!"

"Isn't it a bit scary to think of that while cutting!?"

When I made that retort, Ajisai-san laughed saying "That's true!"

Somehow...

I feel so peaceful.

As if my feelings were getting through, Mai murmured:

"...This feels nice."

And then, as if convincing herself:

"My decision really wasn't wrong after all."

Hearing those words.

For just a moment, I noticed that Ajisai-san sitting across from me had an expression like she wanted to say something.

...Ah, um.

"I have something I want to tell you both again."

Mai turned her body toward us.

At her serious gaze, Ajisai-san also straightened her posture somewhat.

"Yeah."

Same with me.

Mai resolutely opened her mouth.

"The events stemming from my fiancée problem have caused you both all sorts of trouble. I'm sorry."

"No, not at all."

She'd apologized many times before. Besides, Mai was a victim too, so I didn't feel like blaming her.

But Mai shook her head as if even that was her responsibility.

"No, it's my family's problem. It was something I had to handle. So I decided."

Mai declared powerfully:

"No matter what happens, I want to keep dating you both. I'll do everything I can for that."

As if making a vow at a historic event.

"Spending today with you two made me feel it even more strongly. I like you both. I have romantic feelings."

At those words, Ajisai-san nervously pointed at herself.

"M-me too...?"

Mai nodded emphatically.

"Yes, of course."

'Ehhh!'

Our voices overlapped at her unwavering declaration.

Wh-when did this happen...!?

"Actually, I'd like to ask. Could there be a person who becomes lovers with Ajisai but doesn't come to like her?"

"Ehhh...?"

Ajisai-san cried out, but I nodded very strongly. What a persuasive theory. Too true.

Probably even if I knew nothing about Ajisai-san and was introduced to her for the first time as a marriage partner chosen by our parents, I'd surely fall for her on the spot. No doubt about it.

"Of course, those feelings are different from my romantic feelings for Renako. But Renako taught us that it's okay for the types of affection we direct toward each person to be different."

"I didn't do anything so grand."

"Hehehe. So I'll keep protecting our days together. No matter what happens."

Ajisai-san said with downcast eyes:

"When you say no matter what... I don't want Mai-chan to force herself."

"It's okay, Ajisai. I understand you have concerns. You're always a good person who values fairness and honesty. You're probably worried about the current situation where we're deceiving family with my engagement to Satsuki."

Being told directly, Ajisai-san nodded.

"...Yeah."

"Even so."

Mai received those feelings with dignity.

"Leave it to me."

Proudly, putting her hand to her chest:

"I'll never again say I'm leaving you both behind to go somewhere. I want to be with you both forever from now on."

It was a vow that resonated in our hearts.

Enough that Ajisai-san and I found ourselves entranced by Mai.

"Well... it might be late to say this now, but I wanted to properly convey my feelings."

Mai let slip a smile.

Ajisai-san also relaxed her cheeks.

"I was happy. Thank you, Mai-chan."

I also hurriedly nodded at Mai.

"Y-yeah. I'm happy to know Mai's feelings too!"

"A bit embarrassing."

Mai started rummaging through her bag.

"That's right. So as proof of my resolve, I prepared something too."

"Eh, what what?"

Mai held out a stack of papers to Ajisai-san and me.

...Hmm? I've seen this somewhere before.

"A romance business plan. Assuming quarterly lover contracts—that is, three-month operations—I've compiled our future life plans."

"Mai-chan!?"

"That's the thing I already did!"

Mai smiled with a "gotcha" expression.

"How was that? Were you surprised?"

Th-this girl... How much did she prepare for today!? You lovable woman...!

"I was surprised...! I thought Mai-chan was going to call me 'B' this time..."

"Don't make such elaborate things just for a one-shot gag... You're busy, aren't you..."

"But Renako's one-shot gag was quite elaborate too."

"I was serious!"

I shouted. Mai was laughing again.

"Sorry sorry. I was so happy with the love you gave me, I couldn't help wanting to imitate it."

Damn... My cheeks are getting hot now. That's right... I was seriously saying A and B...! My efforts were misdirected...!

Even after entering high school, even after my extrovert debut, even after getting girlfriends, I continue mass-producing embarrassing memories every second.

But, well...

Nothing went perfectly, but I think it's because I struggled and tried my best that I'm still here with these two now. Or at least I want to think that. Rather, I have to think that way to get by. Let me believe that even my past had meaning...!

That's when it happened.

Mai reached her hand toward my cheek.

"Renako."

"Mm...?"

Mai brought that beautiful face closer.

...Huh?

Quite naturally.

She kissed me.

Right in front of Ajisai-san.

"Hyaa...!?"

I heard a cute scream and involuntarily opened my eyes wide.

I pushed back against Mai's slender shoulders with all my strength.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what!"

"What is it, Renako?"

Right in front of me, Mai's princess-like smile.

"What are you doing!?"

My face is incredibly hot!

"What do you mean? I kissed you."

"In front! In public! In front!"

Mai's smiling cheeks were also slightly red.

"'In public' sounds so formal. We're all three dating each other."

"That's true but...! That's true but...!?"

Ajisai-san was covering her face with both hands but clearly watching us through the gaps.

"Mai-chan and Rena-chan kissed..."

"W-we didn't!"

I lied like an elementary schooler.

"You did..."

Damn, it's no good! I can't fool her!

"W-we did...!"

Mai brought her face close again.

"Hehehe, you're cute, Renako."

"Y-you can't!?"

I made an X with both index fingers and rejected that approach with all my might.

"Why not? Are you leaving Ajisai out? That would be sad."

"But you don't need to show off like that!? Mai, you're embarrassed too, right!?"

"Well... somewhat. But I've resolved to protect my happiness with you two. For that, I want to feel an even stronger connection here and now."

Damn... this girl has a good face no matter what she's talking about...!

What she's saying sounds reasonable though...!

"Come on, Renako."

"N-no!"

Because it's embarrassing!

Ajisai-san breathed to calm her palpitations.

"Waaa... I saw people I know kissing for the first time..."

She fanned herself.

"I-I suppose..."

"I got all fluttery... But..."

Ajisai-san clenched her fist on the table.

"From now on, there might be occasions like this... so I have to get used to it...!"

"What kind of occasions!?"

Occasions where one of us kisses when we're all together!? That's not normal!

Gasp... but...

I'm a woman who chose to abandon normalcy and date these two... If that's the case, we three have to make our own rules...!?

It's true that every time Mai or Ajisai-san wanted to kiss, having one of us say 'Oh, sorry, I'm just going to go kiss...' and leave would be somehow more embarrassing...

Or rather, too sexy!

The atmosphere when they came back would clearly be 'Ah, these two just kissed...' and it would get weird!

In that case, maybe it would be better to be able to boldly kiss even in front of people...!? Like communication...!

I mean, in foreign movies and overseas dramas, married couples casually kiss in front of their children, right...? That kind of atmosphere... Right, then it surely wouldn't be lewd!

While I was conflicted, Mai had moved to sit next to Ajisai-san.

Eh?

"Well then, Ajisai."

Mai put her hand on Ajisai-san's back.

"M-Mai-chan..."

W-w-w-w-w-w-wait.

Mai slowly brought her face closer to Ajisai-san—

Ajisai-san also seemed to accept it, gazing back at Mai with moist eyes—!

Wait!

I involuntarily stood up with a clatter.

"U-um!"

Ajisai-san kept her eyes tightly shut.

Mai glanced back at me and floated a faint smile at the corner of her mouth.

D-did she stop...?

But then she turned back to Ajisai-san again—

Ahhh!?

Ajisai-san's, that,

She kissed her cheek.

A small lip sound "chu" was heard, and Mai smiled at me.

"What's wrong, Renako?"

I, who had been frozen in a pose like desperately reaching out to someone about to fall off a cliff, sat back down properly.

"Nothing... in particular..."

Th-this girl... is she playing with me...?

That's mean...! Being mean is mean...!

This won't do... Since Mai likes me, she has to be extra kind to me more than anyone else...! Being mean is forbidden...! Grr.

Meanwhile, Ajisai-san's face had turned as red as pickled ginger.

"It was my cheek..."

"Oh, would Ajisai have preferred the lips?"

Mai asked back teasingly (it's teasing!).

"Th-that's not what I meant...!"

Ajisai-san was flustered and talking like Kaho-chan!

"But you see, before... Mai-chan said... that eventually, I might... kiss you... so I thought... maybe..."

What conversation is that? I don't know about it.

"Hehe... So you've gotten in the mood for it."

"I'm a little conscious of it!"

"Ajisai is so cute."

"Geez..."

Mai petted Ajisai-san's head.

Such a nice atmosphere...

I was just a mob character watching two princesses.

Eh, what's with these two? Aren't they flirting too much? Are they dating? (※They are dating)

Ajisai-san is still holding her cheek with a dazed expression...

They look good together...?

"However, well."

Mai shrugged her shoulders dramatically.

"It seems the most important thing—Renako's emotional preparation—isn't ready yet."

"U-uweh!?"

Suddenly being brought into the conversation, the spotlight fell on the mob character.

"B-but! It's surprising!?"

"It was surprising..."

Ajisai-san, who had witnessed my kiss with Mai right before her eyes, made a fragile sound.

Right!?

"But..."

Putting her hand to her chest, Ajisai-san smiled slightly.

"...It might not have been... an unpleasant feeling..."

Uu... I see, so Ajisai-san didn't feel bad even seeing Mai and me kiss... That's most important...

Yet I...

I'd always insisted that I didn't understand feelings of jealousy. Even when Ajisai-san apologized for putting Kaho-chan on her lap, I made a '?' face.

When Mai became engaged to Satsuki-san, I thought "I see~." (Though before that, when I learned about Mai's engagement from the news, I was just a tiny bit shaken...)

But somehow... when Mai and Ajisai-san were about to kiss right in front of me, I felt "wait wait wait wait."

Is this because it was sudden? Or have feelings of 'jealousy' sprouted within me?

I-I don't know...! Maybe this is the rumored brain destruction...!?

Human relationships are so deep...! There are still so many emotions I don't know about~... I'm getting excited~ (fake cheerfulness).

"Well then."

Mai lifted one hand while smiling.

...Wh-what?

As I braced myself wondering if there was more to come, Mai said:

"Finally, it's Renako and Ajisai's turn."

... ...Eh?

We made awkward eye contact like shy people at an arranged meeting.

Kiss... you mean!?

Simultaneously.

I think our faces turned explosively red.

'No way!'

At that scream perfectly in sync with Ajisai-san, Mai laughed "ahahaha" for a while.

In public is still impossible!!

By the time we finished cleaning up and left the rental room, it was pitch black outside.

I took the train partway home with Mai and Ajisai-san.

The conversation never ran out on the way back either.

Talk about Christmas approaching soon, winter break, studying, the recent cultural festival, and what kind of date we should have next.

It feels like quite a lot of time has passed since we decided to date as three people.

But lately I've finally started to really feel like we're dating as three.

Even with all three of us together, both Mai and Ajisai-san have that warm, unguarded atmosphere like when we're alone together.

I can relax and be with them. This time feels incredibly comfortable.

"...Mm?"

Shortly after getting off the train, I noticed a message had arrived on my phone.

It was from Mai.

'Thank you for today. It was fun.'

I read and reread that short message over and over.

What should I do? I can't stop my mouth from relaxing into a smile.

Hahhh... A deep sigh escaped from the bottom of my heart.

I really like Mai...

Mai was cute preparing excitedly for the dumpling party since morning, she was beautiful being good at cooking, and she was cool declaring her resolve to us.

Truly a girlfriend with no flaws. Ashigaya's super darling. Miss Perfect.

But her mischievous side, the way she sometimes teases me meanly, is childish, and when she shows that innocent smile, ah, I can tell she's really enjoying herself and my chest grows warm. That's surely Mai's true face that only her lovers get to see...

Another message arrived.

'I love you, Renako.'

...!

I involuntarily crouched down on the spot.

I wonder why. Back when I was competing with Mai over whether we'd be best friends or lovers, those should have been lines I'd heard more than trendy love songs... But now, it's like being stabbed in a vital spot...

It wasn't Mai who changed. Well, I think Mai changed too. But most of all, my consciousness changed.

Because I like Mai in a romantic sense...!

Today too, when I sometimes stumbled over words, Mai gently led me. Even kissing me in front of Ajisai-san was Mai's way of advancing our relationship and trying to create stronger bonds.

This relationship started from my outrageous selfishness. But even so, Mai's role is still large. It's surely because Mai is here that we three can continue.

I'm grateful... I need to return words of gratitude to Mai too... First I'll send 'Thank you too!' and... then.

The problem is the following sentence.

'I love you too.'

No good. This message is no good.

Too embarrassing!

I hurriedly deleted the text and typed again.

'I like you too.'

Th-this much should be...

Ugh... But I always say 'like'...

Compared to Mai who conveyed her feelings, are my feelings insufficient...?

'I really like you too!'

How about this?

The emotional amount feels balanced. It feels balanced, but the '!' looks like 'I like like really like Mai!' and seems like a passionate confession!

Once you start worrying about this stuff, it can take hours!

Argh, I'll compromise—how about this!

'I like you too!'

I just removed the 'really' from the previous sentence! How's that!? Isn't this just right!?

I'd rather have her edit it herself. She'd surely say 'Wouldn't "I love you" be better?' That's no good!

Fine! I'm sending this!

Hah, hah... I sent it, I sent it...

Getting my heart disturbed by a single message reply, only caring about what the other person thinks of me... If it were me from just half a year ago, I'd probably be holding my head saying 'That's why being best friends is obviously better!'...

But the current me feels happy even about these emotional fluctuations.

These days with Mai and Ajisai-san are truly fun.

I know it's more happiness than I deserve. I know, but.

So... sorry.

In my heart, I apologize to Lucie-chan.

I really don't want to break up with Mai and Ajisai-san after all.

'—No matter what happens, I want to keep dating you both. I'll do everything I can for that.'

Just like Mai said that.

I feel the same way, Mai.

No matter what happens... I don't want to let go of this happiness.

Because I already know. The happiness of being told I'm loved by Mai, being told I'm loved by Ajisai-san, and... um... kissing them...

The happiness of being cherished by them both.

The current me has become very selfish.

On the way home from our date. Walking the path home, I think strongly.

I felt like fluffy particles of happiness were still floating around me.

Like Tinkerbell's magic powder, Mai and Ajisai-san's feelings are always protecting me. That's how I feel.

—Or so it should have been.

As I walked, the sky suddenly became ominous.

Since I didn't bring a folding umbrella today, I hurried to get home and broke into a light jog, but I stumbled on a gutter and twisted my ankle with a sharp pain.

Ow, it hurts...!

It doesn't seem swollen, but what bad luck... Maybe I used it all up by going on a date with Mai and Ajisai-san...

Hehehe, just kidding. If luck were consumable, I would have been struck by lightning and died the moment I started dating those two.

Even the flock of crows perched on the power lines are cheering me on at full volume with their "caw caw" as they look down at me ☆

No... that's ominous...

I remember that fortune telling from before.

Life Luck: Extinction. Your life might seriously be in danger! You should buy a shelter right now!

I actually looked it up... Underground bunker-type shelters cost about 15 million yen. My allowance is just a tiny bit short~!

Anyway, my safe haven is just a little further. My bedroom futon is like my shelter. Once I get home, I can handle anything...

Hmm...?

A limousine was parked a short distance from my house.

That's not something you see very often. This is... the limousine that Mai always uses for transportation.

I wonder what this is about. Maybe she forgot something, I thought as I stopped in front of the car.

Then the rear door opened.

The person who got out was...

"Eh? Satsuki-san?"

There's no mistaking such a beauty. Why is Satsuki-san here? Does she have business with me?

But the matter with Lucie-chan should already be settled...?

The long black-haired beauty didn't respond to my words.

"Well then, I'll leave the rest to you."

She said this to someone inside the car before walking past me.

"Eh? Um, wait."

I called out, but Satsuki-san still didn't turn around.

Wh-what...? If she doesn't have business with me, then why near my house...? I don't understand at all.

As I watched that back walking briskly away while question marks danced in my head.

A voice came from inside the car.

"Amaori-sama."

The one gripping the steering wheel in the driver's seat was Mai's maid, Hanatori-san.

Hanatori-san didn't smile at all, and with the same cold gaze as always, declared to me:

"Please get in."

The car had been driving for a while.

Sitting in the rear seat, I nervously called out:

"Um... where are we headed...?"

"..."

Hanatori-san hasn't answered anything since earlier.

"Why were you waiting in front of my house with Satsuki-san...?"

"..."

Nothing!

Looking out the window, it feels like we're getting farther and farther from civilization...

Eh, what is this? Could this possibly be an incident?

Am I seriously being taken to an abandoned mansion in the mountains, left there, and about to be chased around by a clown-costumed serial killer...?

Wh-why!?

Hanatori-san, we became friends!

We even had a naked relationship, right!? Right!?

Wh-why... why...!?

I trembled in the corner of the limousine.

"H-Hanatori-san... I'm starting to need the bathroom, you know..."

"..."

Nothing!!

Is that okay!? Is it okay if I dirty the limousine!? That's what ignoring me means, right!? Or do you think I'm lying with all my heart just to escape from here when I don't actually need the bathroom at all!? You're right though!

Fear increased exponentially. Rather than Japanese-style horror where fear creeps up gradually and chills your spine, it had the flavor of Western horror where mortal danger approaches imminently.

The car drove for about another 10 minutes before suddenly stopping.

"We've arrived."

"Eek..."

I nervously looked out the window. There was a parking lot I'd seen several times before, and oh it's just Mai's apartment... except it wasn't at all, it was just regular mountains.

Hey hey hey hey. This is the real deal.

"Please get out."

"No way!"

When I threw a tantrum, Hanatori-san got out of the car by herself.

Uuu... Though terrified, I set my feet down on the gravel ground.

Where is this... A roadside where rough paths stretched front and back. Truly, not a soul passing by. The kind of mountain road where maybe one car passes every few hours.

Thick clouds covered the sky, looking like the weather would break any moment.

"Um, Hanatori-san, what is this about...? Today isn't April Fool's Day, right~?"

I laughed as ingraiatingly as possible with a "hehehe."

Then I had a flash of inspiration.

I rubbed my hands together and smiled at Hanatori-san.

"Speaking of which! You heard, right!? Mai and Satsuki-san apparently got engaged! MaiSatsu faction victory~! Congratulations Hanatori-san! Your dream came true~!"

Hanatori-san's shoulders seemed to twitch as she stood with her back to me.

I can do this!

"Well, those two really suit each other! Childhood friends getting engaged! How romantic! The envy of maidens worldwide! Hollywood movie deal confirmed! Right~!"

Still facing away from me, Hanatori-san asked:

"So you broke up with Mai-sama?"

Her usual flat tone.

Ugh...!

I averted my eyes with all my might.

What should I do? Lie for the moment to survive? Or should I stick to my guns and state the truth resolutely...?

No need to think. The answer is decided.

"Well, yes!"

I'm going to live!

"It can't be helped! It was presumptuous for a commoner like me to date Mai in the first place! I got to dream for just a moment! Thank you Mai~!"

When I threw away my pride and put on a self-deprecating smile, Hanatori-san said firmly:

"Ojou-sama is not someone who would date people with such light feelings."

Uh oh.

"Th-that's certainly true! I wonder what it is! Maybe there were some endless circumstances! Or maybe I became tiresome! I don't really know! I'm just a mass-produced girl!"

"That's enough."

Finally, Hanatori-san turned around to face me.

Her eyes reflected nothing. Empty.

—Too scary.

"Wh-what...?"

"I already know everything."

"Everything...?"

Hanatori-san nodded silently, then opened her mouth.

"When I heard that Ojou-sama was engaged to Lefebvre-sama, I objected to Renée-sama for the first time."

"...Eh?"

Flatly, like falling rain, Hanatori-san spoke.

"Ojou-sama's life belongs to Ojou-sama. No matter how much someone else treasures Ojou-sama, they have no right to force her actions. That's what I told Renée-sama. Because Ojou-sama had a schoolmate she was dating."

"That means..."

I digested those words and asked back.

"You tried to protect Mai and me...?"

That Hanatori-san...

Hanatori-san who had called me a 'poisonous insect' and treated me coldly...

Without answering, Hanatori-san continued.

"Renée-sama would not listen to my words. That was frustrating and vexing. I couldn't protect Ojou-sama. Since then, I had days where I couldn't focus on work. But—"

Hanatori-san shook her head.

"Ojou-sama told Renée-sama herself that she would 'get engaged to Koto-sama instead.' I certainly felt like ascending to heaven and experienced a moment of cardiac arrest, but... even so, I immediately noticed something was off. Ojou-sama is not someone who would date people with light feelings."

Did she just say cardiac arrest?

It seems something incredible happened without my knowledge...

"Unable to bear the growing sense of wrongness each day, if this was what Ojou-sama herself desired, I had to stop it even if it meant shedding tears of blood... With that resolve, Ojou-sama and Koto-sama spoke to me. They had conspired to stop Renée-sama's plan. To protect their lives."

My heart skipped.

Hanatori-san knows.

As she said, 'everything'...!

"Along with disappointed feelings... I felt very fulfilled. Long ago in childhood, those two broke Renée-sama's orders and joined hands. I saw true love."

There, Hanatori-san smiled as if remembering.

"And once again. Their bond was eternally tied without needing to be bound by the tangible form of marriage. So I resolved that this time, for the sake of those two who trusted me enough to confide in me, I would definitely be of help."

I see, so then...

Hanatori-san will be on Mai's side, not her mother's side.

Which means she's on my side too...

I felt all the tension drain from my body, which had been stiff until now.

Thank goodness. There was no need to fear for my life. I still don't understand at all why I was brought to such a remote mountain location, but I'm truly relieved.

"Yeah... thank you, Hanatori-san."

"Therefore—"

Then Hanatori-san threw something at me.

A bundle of papers she'd been carrying under her arm. It hit the gravel road with a sound.

Hmm...? What's this?

Just as I was about to pick it up, I saw the title.

'Picaris Investigation Report'

In the bottom right corner was Terusawa Youko's name.

...Huh? Youko-chan?

"Um, this is—"

I looked up at Hanatori-san. Her bangs hid her eyes as she looked down.

Does she want me to read it...? Nervously picking it up, I brushed off the sand and opened the file.

There was a huge photo of me pasted inside.

Eh!?

"Wh-what is this!?"

Hanatori-san's answer easily surpassed what a mere high school student like me could imagine.

"I commissioned a detective agency to investigate your background. As someone protecting Mai-sama's life, it was the natural thing to do."

"But why is Youko-chan's name...!? No, wait, eh!? Wait!?"

As I flipped through the file, I saw photos of me with Mai, Satsuki-san, Ajisai-san, Kaho-chan—all the Quintet members, and then.

Finally, an outrageous sentence jumped into view.

Investigation results—

Amaori Renako is a four-timer.

"Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

At that moment, thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Ojou-sama and Koto-sama—"

Hanatori-san's voice trembled.

"The true identity of the person they desperately tried to protect was such a woman—"

I felt something like an earthquake rumbling from my feet. In response to the aura rising around Hanatori-san, even the pebbles on the ground seemed to tremble.

Sweat poured from my entire body.

This wasn't just malice. This was killing intent.

At this rate, death—

I have to say something, anything!

"That's wrong! This is a lie! It's a mistake!"

"Oh?"

Hanatori-san looked up.

Her clenched fist looked like a chainsaw to me.

It flashed through my mind. Criminal Code Article 199—

"It's not true!!"

Thrusting both hands forward, I shouted with my voice almost cracking.

"I'm not four-timing!"

"Answer honestly."

As if completely rejecting my protests, Hanatori-san trapped me in her lightless gaze.

"The moment I judge you're lying, I will... you."

"You will what!? What are you going to do!?"

"Well then, let's begin."

"The penalty is proceeding while remaining unclear!?"

Hanatori-san took one step closer to me.

"You are four-timing, aren't you?"

"I'm not! I swear by heaven and earth!"

"You are four-timing, aren't you?"

"There's no way! I swear by Mai!"

"You are four-timing, aren't you?"

"Wait!? Is this one of those RPG things that continues until you say yes!?"

My back hit the limousine. I couldn't retreat any further.

Hanatori-san approaching.

This was the greatest crisis of my life.

—At this rate, I'll really be killed.

No good.

I have no choice but to confess.

"I'm dating Mai and Ajisai-san—the three of us together!"

Hanatori-san looked dumbfounded for a moment.

"...What?"

Crying from sheer terror, I pleaded:

"We talked about this before, Hanatori-san! The two-timing rumors that came up at the cosplay event! Those are true! They're not baseless rumors! I wanted to make both Mai and Ajisai-san happy! So I took both their hands!"

For a while, that voice echoed through the mountains.

A second thunderclap roared.

Hanatori-san muttered in shock:

"...Two-timing...?"

"Y-yeah...! Well, that's what it is!"

It's also annoying to have this resolve simply called 'two-timing,' but right now it would be too foolish to get hung up on that and throw my life away. I nodded repeatedly, acknowledging it.

"So!"

I shouted desperately.

"Please believe me! What's written in that file is completely wrong! It's not four-timing! I'm not four-timing! That would make me human trash! It's different! Please believe me! My only crime is simple two-timing!!"

"It's the same thing!!"

I was left abandoned in the mountains.

Why!?!?!?

Chapter 4: There's No Way Everything Can Work Out Perfectly, Right?

While I said I was abandoned, there was actually a station about a 15-minute walk away, so I took the train home from there. (Thunder rumbled, but it didn't rain.)

I had barely escaped with my life.

But during the journey home, Hanatori-san's words kept spinning round and round in my head.

'This poisonous insect.'

'Why would Ojou-sama choose someone like you?'

'Koto-sama too, why on earth...'

'Honestly, I'm confused too. It's so abhorrent and beyond reason.'

'You've obtained the one-in-8-billion happiness of becoming Ojou-sama's lover, so why are you reaching for other women!? Something is wrong with you!'

'Never approach Ojou-sama again, absolutely never.'

'I was foolish to ever try to believe in you.'

'Poisonous insect.'

'The next time you approach Ojou-sama, I will eliminate you. Even if Ojou-sama resents me for it, I'll stake my life on it. No matter what criminal laws I break, I will definitely—you—'

'—poisonous insect.'

Those words torment me eternally.

Oh, God. Did I really do something so terrible...?

Why do only I have to go through this...?

Because... it was something we decided together...

God...

I was completely beaten down.

***

"...chan, ...Rena-chan..."

... My consciousness floated up from drowsiness.

I suddenly woke up.

In front of me was a kind-faced god.

"...Goddess...?"

"Eh? That's not right."

She laughed softly. Right, she's an angel.

No! It was Ajisai-san.

"It's already break time, you know?"

The surroundings were noisy and bustling. Apparently I'd fallen asleep in the middle of class.

"Ah, sorry... I was sleeping."

I barely slept last night.

Even after getting into bed, I couldn't get what Hanatori-san said out of my head...

"Yeah. Actually, it seemed like you were having a nightmare...? The teacher was troubled."

Ajisai-san furrowing her brow is cute today too.

Her fluffy hair, her gentle voice, everything about her is precious.

Having such a girl as a girlfriend would make people around the world envious. What more could I possibly want?

I understand. I know I'm being greedy.

I thought I'd understood that all along.

"Sorry."

I stood up.

"Eh?"

"I'm going to the rooftop for a bit."

Ajisai-san's eyes wavered in confusion.

Though seeming troubled, she called out to me.

"The next class is about to start..."

Sorry, Ajisai-san.

I left the classroom as if shaking off that voice.

I couldn't look at Mai and Satsuki-san's faces the whole time I was in the classroom.

"Ahh..."

The wind is blowing against me.

December wind is cold. But for the hopeless me right now, it was just the right coldness.

I want to be hurt more. I want someone to punish me. Moderately, not enough to die...

Then... maybe everyone would forgive me for two-timing Mai and two-timing Ajisai-san...

And for seeking happiness beyond my station, not wanting to hurt anyone...

"...I know that's not how it works though..."

My heart was magnificently broken.

Split clean in two, like it was cut with a chainsaw.

When I first started dating them both, I was burning with hope.

Mai and Ajisai-san both have important people in their lives. To those who wish for their happiness, my existence is vague and unstable.

Still, having chosen an "abnormal path," I was burning with determination to work hard enough to earn their support.

I thought I'd been working hard, working hard, working so hard.

But...

In reality, such a thing is impossible.

The moment I chose an "abnormal path," there's no way anyone would support me. Because it's not normal.

My enemy is the world. I can't live with only the people involved being happy. Both Mai and Ajisai-san live within circles of people.

There's no way I could convince everyone around us.

Such a... completely inadequate person like me shouldn't have dreamed such grand dreams.

"I can't do this anymore..."

I let out a weak sound and rested my forehead on the railing.

What should I do now...

Pretending nothing happened and continuing to date Mai as before would probably be impossible...

I really don't want to die yet...

...But I also don't want to tattle on Hanatori-san to Mai.

Because Hanatori-san wasn't saying anything wrong. She acted thinking only of Mai's happiness, believing it was the right thing to do.

And if angry Mai fired Hanatori-san because of that... peace might return temporarily. But what if another person like Hanatori-san who worries about Mai gets angry? Fire that person too? How long would we repeat that?

What if Mai's family gets angry? What if Ajisai-san's family gets angry and says "we absolutely won't accept this"?

Could I really think "let's keep trying anyway" at that point?

Probably impossible.

I thought I didn't want to let go of this happiness no matter what happened...

My determination was naive after all. I never had the resolve to make someone unhappy.

School during class time is quiet.

If only we were the only ones in the world... that would be nice...

But then... both Mai and Ajisai-san probably wouldn't be happy... Because they have precious families, lots of friends, and are loved by everyone...

Ah... I'm thinking only about myself again...

As I sank into such thoughts, I heard the door open behind me.

Hmm...

The door is unlocked because I'm here. But who could it be?

I turned around reluctantly.

"What are you doing~? It's class time~?"

She raised her hand in greeting.

I turned damp eyes toward her.

"...That's my line."

"You're pretty jaded, Renako-kun."

Laughing in a carefree tone was Terusawa Youko-chan.

"Well, class time is perfect for secret conversations. I saw Renako-kun in the hallway and chased after you."

She walked over and stood next to me.

"Thanks for the other day."

"...The other day?"

"Our princess finally got her mood back."

"Ah, yeah..."

When I went crazy trying to blow up Queen Rose with Lucie-chan.

Somehow... it felt like an event from long ago.

I asked hesitantly:

"Hey, Youko-chan. What's 'Picaris'?"

Hearing those words, Youko-chan answered like checking answers on a simple test.

"The name of our detective agency."

"Detective agency..."

"I'm what you'd call a 'detective.'"

Hearing it from her own mouth again was surprising.

At the same time, my feelings fell as if pulled by gravity.

"...I thought of Youko-chan as a friend. But... you approached me to investigate me?"

That's right. That's why Youko-chan knew about me and Nashiji Komachi too.

Acting like nothing happened, all along...

Sad. Lonely. But all of this is because I two-timed Mai and Ajisai-san.

Reaping what I sowed. My body is covered in rust.

"At first, yes."

Youko-chan nodded without any apparent guilt.

"Normally I'd never tell an investigation target this—it violates confidentiality—but whatever. I quit being a detective anyway."

"...You quit?"

"Yeah. This month, the Queen Rose princess and her fiancée are having their engagement ceremony. So I've completed my assignment. Payment was transferred, debt cleared. I'm finally free."

"Engagement ceremony..."

I'd heard of it. A ceremony to formalize a marriage promise.

In other words, Mai and Satsuki-san are really moving toward marriage...

Leaving me behind.

"Actually, debt...?"

"I really hate privileged people."

Youko-chan began to speak.

That voice was a little lower than Youko-chan's usual one, like when she was being Lucie-chan's maid. This is probably Youko-chan's true self.

"I was investigating Renako-kun's background for Queen Rose, but the more I investigated, the more annoyed I got. Oduka Mai, Sena Ajisai, plus Koto Satsuki and Koyanagi Kaho. A wicked woman manipulating and toying with four people. No one would like someone like that, right?"

I'm not four-timing though... I thought, but then again, two-timing isn't much different... I stayed silent and accepted Youko-chan's words.

"But you know."

Youko-chan rested her arms on the railing and spoke in a light voice.

"Getting to know you, well, maybe Renako-kun isn't such a bad person after all."

"..."

That's just consolation. Not everyone thinks that way. I don't even know how serious Youko-chan is being.

"You took on Lucie-san's situation too, even though you looked reluctant. I started thinking maybe you're just someone who can't say no?"

"What's that supposed to mean..."

"You seemed like you'd fall over if I pushed."

Memories of the shower came back and my neck grew hot.

"Th-that was! I think you went too far!"

Seeing me react so dramatically, Youko-chan laughed.

"You still think of someone who did that to you as a friend, so you're pretty big-hearted."

I glared at her.

"You knew what you were doing...!?"

"Renako-kun just likes girls, right?"

"That's wroooong!"

I don't particularly like girls or anything like that!

I've denied it over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over! No one will ever believe me forever!

Youko-chan laughed with an "ahaha."

"So well, now I'm more on the 'like' side, maybe."

"...Hmm."

"Ah, you don't believe me?"

Well, I mean... I looked away.

"Because you were lying to me all along..."

"Then."

Youko-chan touched my shoulder. Eh...

She put her hand to my cheek, and her eyes smiled gently.

"Would you believe me if I kissed you?"

"Wait—"

Seeing me turn pale, Youko-chan laughed again.

"Ahahaha."

I was being teased!!

"What is this!? Youko-chan is the one who likes girls!?"

"Ah, that's funny."

"Stop it...! That would just add another person...!"

"Four-timing is criminal, but if you hit 2000, you'd be Don Giovanni."

"I'm not aiming for that!?"

After laughing for a while, Youko-chan murmured:

"Koto Satsuki."

"...Eh?"

Looking into my eyes:

"Since we're here, I'll tell you. Everything is in that person's palm."

I don't really understand what she means.

"Why would Satsuki-san...?"

"We got a report that the Queen Rose princess's romantic partner was an unfaithful woman, so Koto Satsuki and I were summoned by the queen. That's when the plan to separate the princess from Renako-kun began."

"...Huh?"

Wait, what does that mean...?

"Koto Satsuki has some terrible purpose."

"...Which is?"

Youko-chan spread both hands.

"Who knows?"

"Hey!"

"I have no idea what that person's thinking. Way less than you."

I furrowed my brow.

The queen means... Mai's mother, right?

So they thought I was four-timing from way back, and to separate me from Mai, Youko-chan and Satsuki-san were working together...?

"But then, what about Mai...?"

"Well. She's probably being deceived too, that person."

No way.

That's terrible!

"Because Satsuki-san is an irreplaceable friend! A best friend who recognizes each other! But to think she was deceiving us like that!"

"Seems like something she'd absolutely never do?"

".....Yeah!"

Sorry. If asked whether she'd do it or not, she totally would.

No, Satsuki-san is the bad one! She has too many priors! It's her daily conduct!

I mean, Satsuki-san would probably go as far as blowing up Queen Rose, right!?

Wait! That's not right! I think those aspects of Satsuki-san are good too!

What's good about a personality that could blow up a childhood friend's mother's company!? That would only be praised as a virtue in battle manga!

I'm confused.

"Let me organize this!"

I pressed my temples and held out my palm to Youko-chan.

"First, Youko-chan is a detective..."

"Yes."

"You were deceiving me... That's really awful... Sad..."

"Sorry?"

"I'm hurt... To think all that kindness was fake... I'll become distrustful of people... Just when I thought we'd become friends... Now I'll spend my life suspecting that every new person I meet might be a detective approaching me to investigate... Because of Youko-chan... I want you to take responsibility for my life..."

"My part is long! That's enough!"

I got unilaterally cut off. Awful...

"S-so, I'm misunderstood by Mai's mother and them as 'four-timing'..."

"Eh? Is it a misunderstanding?"

Youko-chan looked back with a blank face.

... I hesitate. Whether to tell the truth or not.

No, but even if I explained here 'It's Youko-chan's fault I'm misunderstood! It's totally different, it's just two-timing (angry),' I'd just get yelled at again... So unreasonable...

I'll skip that and continue.

"As a result, Mai's mother, who wanted to stop her from dating such a terrible woman, gave Youko-chan and Satsuki-san the order to 'make me and Mai break up.'"

"Yes."

"Youko-chan approaching and hitting on me was part of that, and biting my neck in the unit bath wasn't just playing around but a so-called honey trap... to get evidence of cheating... I really will become distrustful of people... responsibility... Responsibility..."

"You're annoying! It was just work!"

For some reason Youko-chan's face turned red as she yelled back. It seems even she was embarrassed doing it.

I could continue complaining about Youko-chan for hours, but since that would be pointless, I returned to talking about Satsuki-san.

"So Satsuki-san is doing something else entirely to make Mai and me break up. What exactly, Youko-chan doesn't know... right?"

"Yes."

If everything Youko-chan just said is true, that's how it is.

...Though I think it's pretty questionable to take the word of someone who was secretly investigating me while hiding her identity...

See! Instant distrust of people! Responsibility! Responsibility!

But... it's true that Satsuki-san and Youko-chan often clashed as if they had some connection. Maybe it's not complete lies...

If so.

What Satsuki-san did openly was become Mai's fiancée.

And probably, send Hanatori-san after me.

Those two things.

Otherwise, there's no explaining why Satsuki-san was in that limousine. She was lying in wait for me. The four-timing investigation report was probably handed over by Satsuki-san too. (Because if Hanatori-san had read the investigation report earlier, she would have stormed into my house at that point.)

"What exactly is Satsuki-san..."

"Honestly, she didn't seem to be working just for money either."

First of all, Satsuki-san knows I'm not four-timing. Because Satsuki-san and I aren't dating! Yet she won't clear up the misunderstanding and is trying to use the situation.

Satsuki-san's purpose.

I don't understand anything about Satsuki-san, but maybe there were hints somewhere in what happened before.

I look back at her words and actions.

Satsuki-san sent me a message the day I decided to date Mai and Ajisai-san.

'Date me too, Amaori.'

Then, when I pressed her about why she did that, Satsuki-san who came to my house said:

'Why I did that—I don't want to say, but that's my answer. That's all.'

I thought her behavior was a bit strange, but Satsuki-san acting strange is pretty normal, so I didn't particularly suspect anything...

Satsuki-san borrowed romance games from Kaho-chan, and according to her mother, she's been reading lots of romance novels lately... doing things unlike herself.

From all these points, the conclusion is...

Thinking normally, very normally.

"...Does Satsuki-san want a lover?"

Youko-chan put her hand to her chin.

"Koto-san doesn't seem like such a simple person."

"Yeah..."

Actually, if she really wanted a lover, I think Satsuki-san could make one easily.

She's a bit hard to approach, but she's smart, strikingly beautiful, kind in her own way, and considerate. When we dated for two weeks, I thought Satsuki-san would 'make a good wife.'

There should be no need for her to be obsessed with someone like me.

"Then what's Satsuki-san's purpose..."

Does she really like Mai and is trying to marry her...? Or is she trying to achieve some purpose by marrying Mai...?

I wonder. Something's nagging at me.

Just a little more... I feel like I'm about to have an insight...

Just then—

The rooftop door opened with a bang.

"—Then let's ask her!"

We turned around in surprise.

A cute girl with fluffy hair was standing there with her arms crossed.

"Ah, Ajisai-san!?"

"Oh my."

"Yes! I'm Sena Ajisai!"

With uncharacteristic energy, Ajisai-san strode toward us with determination.

"Let's ask Satsuki-chan! We know everything now! she should know!"

"Sena-san, isn't your character different?"

"It's not different! Because I've been feeling frustrated with Satsuki-chan all along!"

Ajisai-san clenched her fists and emanated a huffing aura.

"Y-you were?"

"I was!"

Ajisai-san nodded about five times with excess momentum.

"Actually, it's class time right now..."

"Rena-chan is skipping too!"

She pointed at me sharply. Th-that's true...

"Right... I made you skip class, sorry..."

"Ah, no, not at all. I was worried about Rena-chan... ehehe..."

Ajisai-san smiled softly. Ah, I made such an angel worry... I'm always only thinking about myself...

But suddenly realizing, Ajisai-san shook her head about six times.

"Yeah, so! Let's catch Satsuki-chan and hear what she has to say!"

"O-okay..."

Ajisai-san was full of energy.

But actually...

Hesitating, I wonder if I should talk to Mai first.

Mai would listen to what Ajisai-san and I have to say. But if she learned that the source of information was a detective hired by her mother... I feel like Mai would believe Satsuki-san's side of the story.

We have no way of knowing how thoroughly Satsuki-san planned her strategy to convince Mai...

In that case, talking directly to the person in question would be fastest after all.

Even the Hanatori-san incident might be resolved without making a big deal of it if Satsuki-san, who handed over the materials, dismisses it with "that was all lies."

It won't be a fundamental solution, but... thinking about it, it might be a brilliant plan!

But then I have a vision of a giant Satsuki-san looming beyond the mountains.

Ugh... The biggest problem is whether that Satsuki-san will talk to us honestly.

Satsuki-san is strong. Always strong. And she's the type of strong character who doesn't get weaker even when she becomes an ally.

Even during the sports festival, when she was called out by Class B students and confronted by three people at once, she defeated them all...

If it were just me, it would definitely be impossible.

But! Ajisai-san is here!

Electric attacks against Gyarados! Archers against flying units! Luffy against Enel! That's Sena Ajisai against Koto Satsuki! Satsuki-san is soft on Ajisai-san!

I can see the light!

"Yeah! Got it, Ajisai-san!"

I nodded firmly.

"With Ajisai-san here, all problems might be solved!"

"I'll do my best!"

"Satsuki-san will cry, apologize, and turn herself in on the spot! As expected of Ajisai-san!"

"I-I'll do my best!"

And even if Satsuki-san and Youko-chan's stories don't match up and it turns out Youko-chan was actually deceiving me... we should still see some kind of progress compared to now.

Much better than staying by Mai's side and getting Criminal Code Article 199'd by Hanatori-san!

"Let's do it, Ajisai-san! Let's defeat Koto Satsuki, the root of all evil who controls all the world's darkness! Now's the time to carve your name into legend, Ajisai-san!"

"Of course, Rena-chan! Leave everything to me!"

Ajisai-san puffed out her chest, abandoning even retorts to my excessive statements. So reassuring!

Even as an angel, the current Ajisai-san is as dependable as the Archangel Gabriel!

"Um~"

From beside us getting excited, Youko-chan interjected.

"By the way, from where did you start listening, Sena-san?"

R-right...!

I feel like we talked about various things that would be bad if overheard!

Then Ajisai-san answered very honestly.

"Um... from around where Satsuki-chan is doing something different to make Mai-chan and Rena-chan break up, but Terusawa-san doesn't know what, I think."

"Ah, from there..."

She was obviously relieved.

Youko-chan also sighed with relief.

"Ah, good. So you didn't hear where I said to Renako-kun 'Should I give you a kiss?'"

"Eh!?"

"Youko-chan!?"

"Ahahaha."

Youko-chan burst out laughing.

Y-you're unforgivable... Not satisfied with just making people distrust others...!

"Just kidding. It would be too troublesome to stick my neck into this quagmire any further. From now on, I'm going to live my own life freely for my own sake."

I need to clear up this misunderstanding with the trembling Ajisai-san...!

"N-no, Ajisai-san... Actually, Youko-chan was also an assassin who approached me to make Mai and me break up...!"

I desperately appealed to Ajisai-san who was staring at me with her hand to her mouth.

"So! Getting in that cramped unit bath together, having my body washed by hand, getting my neck bitten—that was all a honey trap! Not because Youko-chan liked me or anything!"

"Rena-chan!?"

Gasp...!

I feel like I just dug an enormously huge grave that will go down in history—

"Well, that's mostly true."

Youko-chan patted the shoulder of frozen me.

"At least I thought Renako-kun's body wasn't bad. Soft and curvy with big boobs. Let's get together again sometime if we have the chance ♡"

"Sorry! Impossible!"

Next to me shouting that, Ajisai-san kept spinning with dizziness for a while...

D-did I do something again!?

After apologizing profusely to Ajisai-san, explaining the situation, getting thoroughly scolded, apologizing more, being forgiven because this isn't the time to be hung up on such things, and in exchange being made to

promise earnestly that we'd definitely take a bath together again once things calmed down...

And here we are now.

Ajisai-san and I were waiting for our target in the grounds of a certain shrine.

"I wonder if Satsuki-chan will come."

"I-it'll be fine, I'm sure."

I answered while slightly trembling.

Somehow earlier Ajisai-san had strangely intimidating presence that was scary...

She must be fired up because we're going to talk to Satsuki-san... That must be it!

While feeling both reassurance and somehow guilt (why!?) from such Ajisai-san, I said:

"Actually, this shrine is a place full of memories for Satsuki-san."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Apparently it's where she first became best friends with Mai. So surely, being called out to this place means there's some special business, and she should come."

"I see~"

Ajisai-san smiled pitifully.

"You know a lot about stories of Satsuki-chan that I don't know, Rena-chan."

"Eh!?"

Is it just me, or did a dark aura just rise around Ajisai-san...

No, it must be my imagination. After all, Dark Ajisai is a delusion created by my weak heart. There's no way Ajisai-san would direct negative emotions at anyone. Impossible.

"W-well, it is cold outside this season."

"That's right~"

When I uttered those harmless words, Ajisai-san nodded along. See, it was just an illusion after all. Phew, close call. I need to get my tendency toward delusions under control ☆

All that's left is to pray that Satsuki-san comes.

Besides, even if she ignores this summons, we're in the same class. Satsuki-san should understand better than anyone that she can't keep running forever—

Then.

"Good grief..."

Stepping on the stairs, that person appeared.

A black-haired beauty who would make anyone in town turn around. But now she had an unfathomable sense of intimidation.

Her swaying hair was like a witch's. Honestly, incredibly scary.

But... I'm not alone!

"I'm not exactly free either. Being summoned like this is troublesome—"

Satsuki-san approached us while muttering arrogantly.

And her gaze stopped on Ajisai-san.

"...Sena?"

"Thank you for coming, Satsuki-chan."

Satsuki-san's eyes widened. And Ajisai-san's smile was charged with determination.

The two faced off directly.

Satsuki-san thought she was being called out by me alone.

Honestly, seeing this figure full of intimidation from head to toe, I don't think she'd confess everything just because Ajisai-san came along like 'Uu, forgive me Sena... I don't want you to hate me above all others so I'll confess everything. My purpose is actually—'!

Seeing Ajisai-san's presence when she shouldn't be here, what will Satsuki-san do—

Will she get angry, brazenly play dumb, or...!?

Satsuki-san turned around.

"I'm going home."

"Eh!?"

Why!?

"W-wait, Satsuki-san! We need to talk! There's important business!"

"I see. I don't have any. Well then, goodbye."

"Wait, Satsuki-chan!"

Ajisai-san also hurried to walk alongside Satsuki-san.

This reaction is completely unexpected!

"We know everything! What you're doing, Satsuki-san!"

I threw out strong words to catch her attention, but Satsuki-san didn't even glance this way.

Satsuki-san gradually increased her walking speed. Wait wait wait!

At this rate, she'll shake us off!?

"Why!? Hey, Satsuki-san!?"

"How noisy."

"Is it because Ajisai-san is here!? That's it, right!? Satsuki-san is always gentle only with Ajisai-san! Is it your policy not to fight battles you know you'll lose!?"

"Be quiet."

"Besides, even if you run, you'll be caught eventually!? I know where your house is anyway! So there's no point in running, is there!? You should show some—"

In the middle of my words, Satsuki-san.

Just like that—broke into a run.

No way!?

"You have no restraint!"

I never thought it would go this far.

She's way too weak against Ajisai-san! It's like meeting a magic-immune monster when your skill set only has magic spells—such a clean decision!

"W-wait!"

I called out, but Koto Satsuki isn't someone who'd stop for that. I knew that though!

Coming out from the shrine to the alley, Satsuki-san ran off clutching her bag.

"Hey!"

There's no way I could catch up to Satsuki-san seriously running away. This is bad, I'll lose sight of her.

Just when I thought that.

My hand was pulled hard.

"Ah, Ajisai-san!?"

"Let's chase her, Rena-chan!"

Her voice was full of determination.

"Why!?"

I mean, even if she runs away now, we can just meet at school! Even for Ajisai-san, that's not a rational decision!

Ajisai-san pouted and shouted loudly.

As if that fulfilled all explanatory responsibility.

"I just don't like it!"

"I see!"

Then it can't be helped!

It's not about logic! If it's not about logic, I can't stop it!

Satsuki-san running away. Me and Ajisai-san chasing after her.

What is this situation!

Three high school girls seriously playing tag on their way home from school is, how should I put it, incredibly embarrassing!

"Satsuki-chan!"

And without regard for onlookers, Ajisai-san shouted. Such courage!

It's been a while since I've seen Ajisai-san step on the gas, but this angel once tried to go on a solo runaway trip during summer vacation. When push comes to shove, she can pull off this much!

"Don't run away! Let me hear Satsuki-chan's true feelings!"

From the distance, Satsuki-san's loud voice bounced back.

"There's no such thing!"

Satsuki-san is giving herself away too! Because if there really wasn't anything, she wouldn't be running!

"What are you thinking!?"

"! It's something trivial!"

As if it were predetermined, Satsuki-san properly answered back. Satsuki-san can't ignore Ajisai-san's words! As expected of a quadruple weakness!

While being pulled along by the hand, I appealed to Ajisai-san.

"Ajisai-san! I think this is working!"

"Yeah...!"

Still running, Ajisai-san shouted.

"I didn't like it!"

Using the swaying black hair as our marker, we desperately moved our feet.

If we slowed down even a little, she'd shake us off any moment.

"When Satsuki-chan told me 'it's for your sake,' I didn't like it!"

That was when Satsuki-san was asked why she was going so far.

She had answered that Sena should just think it was for her sake. That she was just repaying a debt she owed to Sena.

Ajisai-san was denying those words.

"Even if it means lying to my family, being told it's for my sake doesn't make me happy at all!"

Through the alley, through the shopping district, rushing through the green light—

"Then!"

Satsuki-san shouted back irritably.

"That means your feelings were only to that extent! I misunderstood you, Sena!"

"That's not true! But I'm sure there's another way! A way to make people understand, definitely!"

"Anyone can just insist on things! Even Amaori can!"

"Satsuki-chan is wrong!"

"—!"

Regardless of why I was brought up... that one statement surely pierced through. Because Satsuki-san had always been completely soft on Ajisai-san.

Having her actions denied by someone who was inherently good, Satsuki-san bounced back with a shout.

"You—stupid woman!"

"What!?"

That Satsuki-san just insulted Ajisai-san!?

I was so shocked that I let go of Ajisai-san's hand.

What about Ajisai-san...!?

Maybe she's crying. Like 'Why would you say such things, Satsuki-chan is so mean...' If that happened, I'd definitely take Ajisai-san's side!? Even for Satsuki-san, there are things you can and can't say!

Ajisai-san wasn't crying.

Rather, she bit down on her lips firmly and shouted back.

"Satsuki-chan! You're being nasty!"

As if stumbling, Satsuki-san's steps slowed slightly.

"What's that...! Your repertoire of harsh words is impoverished!"

"Because you are being nasty!"

"Stupid woman! Stubborn! Hypocrite! I've always hated that about you!"

Stop it already!

Every time Ajisai-san gets insulted by Satsuki-san, my stomach hurts instead!

I don't want this! I don't want to see this! I like it when you two get along!

"That's a lie, Ajisai-san! Satsuki-san has always loved Ajisai-san!?"

My meaningless follow-up just disappeared pointlessly.

Ajisai-san retorted.

"Satsuki-chan! Do you like Mai-chan!?"

"...!"

"Or do you like Rena-chan!? Is that why you're doing this!?"

"Ehhh!?"

Satsuki-san likes me...!?

No, I don't think that's it...!

Ajisai-san, having raised her voice too much, shouted as if gasping for oxygen.

"Tell me properly, in Satsuki-chan's own words!"

Then—

Ajisai-san tangled her feet and fell spectacularly!

"Kyaa!"

"Owah!?"

Stepping on the gas too hard, Ajisai-san crashed!

A-are you okay!?

Her coat seemed to cushion the fall, so Ajisai-san appears to be fine, but...

Ajisai-san, who had fallen forward, said to me as I instinctively reached out to help:

"Rena-chan... Satsuki-chan...!"

Gasp.

Looking up, Satsuki-san had also stopped, distracted by Ajisai-san's fall.

For a moment, our eyes met.

Satsuki-san's face was...

Like a bomb carrying feelings ready to explode at any moment, yet unable to say anything.

No, but... Ajisai-san is...!

Ugh!

I—

"Satsuki-san!"

Chased after her, running again.

"...!"

Drawn in, Satsuki-san ran with her black hair flowing.

Agh!

Anyway, I understood. Indeed, Ajisai-san is right.

Having Satsuki-san escape here is definitely... somehow unpleasant! That's it!

I don't even remember where or how I ran, but I kept chasing that figure.

Before I knew it, rice fields spread out around us.

I recognized this place. The scenery from when I desperately ran away from Satsuki-san's apartment before.

I was completely out of breath. I'd taken off my coat and blazer partway through and carried them while running, so both hands were heavy. I'm not exactly the type with a lot of stamina!

But the one who reached her limit first was Satsuki-san. She'd exhausted her stamina by shouting back at Ajisai-san.

Satsuki-san finally stopped but still tried to move her feet—

This is bad. If it comes down to a battle of willpower, I definitely have no chance of winning!

I squeezed out a final sprint to my limit. I hugged Satsuki-san from behind. Actually, that was more like a tackle.

"Satsuki-san!"

"...!"

We tumbled and fell over.

Something on my body hurts!

"Hah, hah, hah... Finally, finally caught you, Satsuki-san..."

I felt like I'd run a lifetime's worth. About half of me felt relief thinking 'Now I can rest!'—when.

"Huh?"

Even though I should have been grappling Satsuki-san from behind, somehow I found myself being mounted.

"..."

Silent eyes looked down at me.

Oh no—

"S-Satsuki-san, um—"

"...How dare you..."

"Eep!"

"Amaori, how dare you bring Sena in front of me..."

It was a voice like hearing something from behind a door that should never be opened.

I froze up.

Satsuki-san's hair was swaying even without wind.

I'm going to be killed—

I have to say something, anything!

If I lose in courage! (Though I'm already losing!) My life ends here!

Desperately, I shouted.

"What exactly do you want to do, Satsuki-san!"

"I don't know that myself!"

An angry voice far surpassing mine was hurled at me.

Y-you don't know...!

After doing whatever you wanted, that's so unreasonable!

Satsuki-san is always unreasonable, but this time she's even more unreasonable!

"Isn't that irresponsible!? Even becoming Mai's fiancée!"

"So what! She's happy about it!"

"You're the one who sent Hanatori-san after me too, aren't you!?"

"I just told her the facts!"

She keeps confessing!

"Who's four-timing! You know it's fabricated!"

"Two-timing and four-timing are the same thing!"

"You said it again!"

Satsuki-san with her hair standing on end in fury raised her fist.

The shape of that hand was—a closed fist.

No way!? Violence is wrong!

I instinctively closed my eyes and thrust both hands forward.

Desperately, I shouted.

"—Do you like me, Satsuki-san!?"

After a while.

...No pain came.

Fearfully, I opened my eyes.

Satsuki-san was still straddling me, but had her face down.

The sun had completely set, and I could see the brilliant moon behind her.

"I—"

As if savoring each word, Satsuki-san groaned.

"I don't fall in love with anyone."

Words that Satsuki-san had repeated over and over.

I don't think I'm loved by Satsuki-san at all either. If Satsuki-san liked someone, it would definitely be Mai rather than someone like me.

Satsuki-san likes Mai and was trying to steal the fiancée position. That would still make sense.

But the current Satsuki-san is...

"Then..."

Looking up at Satsuki-san, I asked with a face about to cry.

"Why are you crying?"

"...What?"

Hurriedly, Satsuki-san wiped her own eyes.

There were no tear tracks there.
But I was certain I thought it. The current Satsuki-san was crying.

While my body was pressed against the cold, hard ground, I continued shouting.

"It's fine, isn't it! If Satsuki-san falls in love! There's nothing strange about it! Because Satsuki-san is such a cute girl too!"

"__"

Driven by the single-minded need to keep talking about anything, I continued.

"If it's my fault, I'll apologize! If Satsuki-san really, really, really loves Mai, then not like this! Let's start with a proper, honest confession! And, um, dating as four people might be a bit difficult this time! But I'll work hard to

make things work out somehow! So for now! For now, let me hear Satsuki-san's true feelings—"

Satsuki-san placed both her hands.

On my neck.

"...Be quiet."

...Eh?

Gradually, gradually, she began applying pressure.

Wait, hold on!?

Could this possibly be targeting my n-neck!? Isn't this that thing I hear about!? That incredibly dangerous thing!?

—Isn't this strangulation!!

A-a-awawawawa...!

"Who or whom, such things are really... trivial..."

Like a curse, Satsuki-san's voice rained down.

"I don't fall in love. Such things are a waste of life. Mai, Amaori, Sena—everyone, everyone is wrong. Everyone in this world is wrong. I'll prove it. Love is trivial. Love only takes. Love should just die."

I was the first to shed tears from sheer terror...!

"S-Satsuki-san..."

To me, trembling like a small animal, Satsuki-san…

Tensed both her hands—

But didn't follow through.

"Christmas engagement ceremony."

"E-eh..."

"If you can't stop me by that day, Mai will be mine. In the end, she couldn't abandon what was precious to her. She chose that she has something more important to protect than love."

Words repeated many times.

To choose something means not choosing something else.

Satsuki-san stood up as if suddenly losing interest, and then.

Looking down at me like a completely knocked-out loser, with the moon at her back, she declared:

"Struggle all you want. Amaori Renako. If you don't want to let go of that 'love.'"

Even after Satsuki-san left, I couldn't move from that spot for a while.

I-I thought I was going to die...

That's right. It was strange from the beginning.

When she said she'd become Mai's fiancée.

An unnatural sense of wrongness.

That was—

Satsuki-san never looked happy.

She had always looked happy before, no matter what. Especially when she made Mai depressed—that was incredible.

When she thrust that photo of me kissing her at Mai. When she beat Mai in that FPS match. When she defeated Mai on a test for the first time.

Back then, back then, she looked so happy it was like a demon descending to earth to commit every evil!

But this time, even though being a 'fiancée' was an opportunity to put Mai in lifelong debt.

The usual Satsuki-san would have pestered Mai annoyingly, saying something like 'From now on, go to sleep every night offering prayers of gratitude to me, okay?'

But there was nothing.

This is definitely strange.

All of this must be because she feels guilty about something.

Looking up. The moon shining in the night sky.

I've always longed for beautiful things.

They were always someone other than myself—like photos of elementary school classmates looking good on Instagram, or the sun-like woman who shone brilliantly in class, Oduka Mai.

And Koto Satsuki.

But now I know.

Everyone is struggling, moving toward the light. Chasing light to fulfill themselves.

I don't know what Satsuki-san wants to do. What exactly she's hiding. Why she's so determined that she "doesn't fall in love"...

But she told me what she's trying to do.

Christmas engagement ceremony.

If the ceremony takes place, the relationship between Mai, Ajisai-san and me will be completely over. The three of us won't be able to be lovers anymore.

That's the deadline. In that case—

I thrust my palm toward the moon, then clenched it.

At least I can say this much.

Satsuki-san is serious. She's someone who absolutely does what she says she'll do.

Then I have to challenge her seriously too.

Much more than any past contest.

If I lose this, my life will be taken away. With that level of resolve.

"...I understand. Satsuki-san."

Looking up at the moon, I vowed.

"I will stop Satsuki-san."

That was a challenge.

She's telling me to 'try and stop me.'

A battle with life on the line.

I'll use any means available, and I'll surely rely on Mai and Ajisai-san again. And more than that, there's someone I need to talk to.

"I'll go meet her. And confess everything, and get her to accept us."

Sorry. I think of Satsuki-san as a friend, and I've been helped by her many times, and I'm more grateful to her than anyone.

I really, really love Ajisai-san too!

But I don't want to let go of Mai either!

Because this is my life—

"To Mai's mother—Oduka Renée-san!"

So once again, we…

—begin the continuation of our war.

Her oldest memory was the back of her crying mother.

That trembling figure was so small, and even now it's burned into the back of her eyelids, never leaving.

Why are you crying?

When young Satsuki asked this, her mother answered:

—Mommy was rejected by Daddy.

Her mother was a single mother who raised Satsuki all by herself.

She was always bright and cheerful, but in reality, she was hopelessly romantic and quick to entrust her fate to others—a hopeless mother.

Satsuki had never seen her father's face even once. They hadn't even registered their marriage from the beginning. In reality, their separation was probably just a countdown.

The end that was bound to come eventually, simply came.

Just that—something even Satsuki understood by elementary school's upper grades—her mother couldn't understand.

—Satsuki-chan must never become like Mommy.

While hugging her tightly, she was told this.

Study properly, attend a good university, get a respectable job, and then.

Have a happy marriage with a good person—

Without understanding why, she simply nodded.

'Yeah... Mommy.'

Those words, that wish, were carved deep, deep into Satsuki's depths.

Her mother fell in love countless times.

Most were customers who visited her mother's shop, but sometimes they were people introduced by acquaintances, or even strangers who just approached her on the street.

Each time, her mother would get excited and smile more.

The brightening atmosphere at home made young Satsuki happy too.

—This time it's definitely right.

Her mother's words, repeated so many times, however, Satsuki learned were illusions.

Her mother had devastatingly bad luck with men. No matter how well things seemed to go, breakups always waited at the end. Whether it was the men's fault, or her mother fundamentally lacked the talent for love, or both.

And each time, the house became dark and depressed.

If unhappiness was bound to come eventually, happiness was just a phenomenon.

Satsuki gradually became uncomfortable with her mother, who lived each day with all her might.

Why didn't she understand? Why couldn't she realize it wouldn't work out again? Why did she repeat falling in love over and over? Why.

Why wasn't it enough that she was right there beside her?

While comforting her mother many times, Satsuki gradually built up these thoughts inside.

Why did mere men she'd just met try so easily to surpass the absolute bond of family? And why did her mother wish for it?

Why must precious people be hurt by being swept away by such vague emotions?

Without finding an answer, Satsuki gradually grew up, and then.

Eventually, a hopeless truth struck Satsuki.

Satsuki often visited her mother's workplace.

After school. Leaving a small daughter alone in the apartment posed security risks. Satsuki had been a beautiful girl from a young age.

Some days she was left at her mother's family home, but her mother's relationship with her family was poor, so it couldn't be every day.

Her mother's workplace had the problem of being bad for a minor's education, but... Satsuki, arriving with her school bag, quickly became familiar and beloved at her mother's workplace.

When she spread her homework on the table, the women around her would compete to teach Satsuki. Everyone told her not to become like them, the same thing her mother said, and each time Satsuki would nod earnestly and get teased.

Noisy but comfortable days.

But during those days, Satsuki realized something.

The women who were always kind to her. Each time she was treated kindly, Satsuki quickly grew to like them. Of course, at the time she didn't think it had romantic meaning at all.

But anxiety arose.

—I fall for people when they're kind to me.

It was natural for a child to admire the adults around her.

Yet Satsuki's concern eventually faced an inevitable doubt.

During dinner. In the middle of happily telling her mother about the day's events, darkness struck before her eyes.

—Am I the same as Mother?

'Satsuki-chan?' her mother asked, tilting her head cutely.

Smiling, with a trembling voice, Satsuki deflected with 'it's nothing.'

A mother who charmed everyone and lived as if in love with love itself.

That blood also flowed in this body.

So I fall for people around me—

When she realized this, Satsuki became terrified.

Of distorting her own life through love.

Of someday liking some random newcomer more than precious family, making her loved ones unhappy.

So Satsuki made various excuses and stopped going to her mother's workplace.

She was afraid. Of someday becoming a foolish woman like her mother.

So she decided.

If love would distort me and my family.

Something like this.

I don't need it.

Satsuki still remembers her mother's back from that time.

Crying like that is wretched.

Entrusting your life to someone else is foolish. Making others unhappy because of it is even worse. I never need to like anyone for my whole life. I'd be happy living with just Mother and me as we are.

—Therefore, Koto Satsuki doesn't fall in love.

Rather than repeat her mother's mistakes, she didn't need to like anyone.

For young Satsuki, it wasn't yet a feeling firm enough to call resolve.

But that feeling grew stronger each day.

Love is trivial.

Love only takes.

Love should just die.

—And so, in the middle of that journey.

In days spent sinking her heartbeat to the bottom of a well and living with a lid on it.

Koto Satsuki would eventually meet that girl who transferred to her elementary school—

"Nice to meet you, I'm Oduka Mai. Please take care of me."

****E P I L O G U E****

Tokyo, Shibuya. In a high-rise building where the deepening night's dew still faintly remained on the glass walls—Queen Rose headquarters. The dignified reception room set up on the top floor was Oduka Renée's chamber.

"So it can be held without problems on schedule."

"...I see."

When Hanatori reported this, Oduka Renée sank deep into her chair and sighed. Unlike the response when handling business matters, her expression held a dull heaviness.

Earlier, the laptop display Hanatori had turned toward her showed a certain venue. A formal Japanese-style venue with beautiful white wooden corridors and vermillion pillars.

The engagement ceremony.

The date for Oduka Mai, Renée's only daughter.

It was an exceptional speed. Hanatori had handled everything—making behind-the-scenes arrangements with various parties, securing the venue through the shortest route, and preparing the floral decorations, costumes, and banquet menu.

The speed was possible because it was a ceremony with only a limited number of attendees and minimal media presence, but even so, Hanatori's vitality was extraordinary.

All of this was to prevent unnecessary interference—that single-minded purpose drove everything.

"You certainly hurried, didn't you, Hanatori."

"Eh? Well, yes."

"Even though you opposed Mai and Satsuki-san's engagement so much."

At Renée's murmured words, Hanatori shamefully lowered her face.

That's right. She had wanted to protect Mai's happiness. For a time, she had lost herself and even faced cardiac arrest, but that feeling alone had been genuine.

Unlike Lucie or Satsuki—even if those around them branded "that lover is unworthy of Mai," Hanatori alone intended to listen to Mai's wishes until the end.

It was true that she had sincerely wished for Mai and Satsuki to become engaged. But even so, just as young Koto Satsuki had once put her body on the line to protect Mai, Hanatori wanted to do the right thing.

However, that wish was not granted.

"…Because I've come to see that it was I who was mistaken."

The girl for whose sake Mai and Satsuki deceived Renée, even conspiring together to shield her, proved unworthy of such devotion.

"Renée-sama knew everything, didn't you? That's why you gave me the detective agency's investigation results at that timing?"

The other day, Hanatori had been summoned by Renée and told that Mai's romantic partner was four-timing.

Despite thinking she had a good eye for people from her professional experience evaluating many models... it was all due to her own moral failings.

She felt as if the ground beneath her feet was crumbling away.

That's why Hanatori had solemnly followed Renée's orders.

—To crush the scandal before the engagement ceremony.

Ordered thus, Hanatori had delivered Satsuki, who had come to Queen Rose headquarters on business, and then confronted Mai's romantic partner one-on-one to drive the point home.

Never approach Ojou-sama again—

"Dull charcoal."

Renée murmured.

"My first impression when I saw that girl was a worthless roadside stone. An existence completely mismatched with Mai, who illuminates the world with her brilliance. To think she would stir things up this much. Anyway... finally, I can breathe easily."

"...Yes."

Hanatori thought of the calendar. She honestly couldn't judge whether this was truly right. But she no longer had the energy to object to Renée, who believed that Mai settling down was most important of all.

At that moment, Renée's smartphone on the table vibrated.

If Hanatori's memory was correct, there should have been no meetings or appointments scheduled at this time...

Renée reached for her phone, frowning slightly.

"It's the first time she's called."

"Meaning...?"

Renée switched the phone to call mode and began speaking there.

"Yes, it's me. It's been a while."

Renée's calm voice.

But the next moment, Hanatori's face froze.

The caller was—

'Mai's mother, it's been a while.'

Amaori Renako.

The poisonous insect she should have crushed—why—

'There's something I really want to talk about.'

But that voice was strong, completely different from the terrified girl from that day.

Involuntarily—

Hanatori felt a premonition that something big was about to start moving.

Afterword

Greetings, this is Mikami Teren.

The third installment of the "Terror! Deadlines Really Come Every Day! Anime Commemoration! Watanare 3-Month Consecutive Publication Campaign." Finally, the main volume has been released. Volume 8!

As promised, I didn't make you wait a year! Plus it's under 300 pages! Thin!

This is because I mistakenly wrote 18 lines per page.

Regular bunko format is 17 lines per page, so accounting for that, it normally exceeds 300 pages. (By the way, Volume 4 used the same trick—in proper bunko format it would have been about 430 pages)

As I hinted in the previous afterword (Volume 7), this time it's the first part of Satsuki's two-part arc. Despite that, Satsuki-san has relatively few appearance scenes? That's right...

Like Volumes 6 and 7, the first part balances things across both volumes total, so just the first part alone inevitably... you know!

Instead of a huge catharsis, I tried to pack in as many interesting scenes as possible... I think...

Actually, I realized that ultimately, the only thing you should say in a first part's afterword is "I'll properly resolve all the plot threads I set up this time in the second part, so trust me!"

So I'll say it.

"I'll properly resolve all the plot threads I set up this time in the second part and tie everything up, so trust me!"

Good... Now that all readers believe me, I can safely proceed with the afterword.

1: Watanare Anime Currently Airing to Great Reviews!

Have you all watched it yet? The Watanare anime.

Well, people who've read the original but haven't watched the anime probably aren't interested in anime to begin with (and that's totally fine—honestly I'm incredibly happy just that you're reading the original), so there's no need to promote it in the source material. But I'm happy so I'll say it!

Watanare anime currently airing to great reviews! (※We're also releasing "#WatanareAnimeAfterword" on X weekly!)

It's gotten more attention than I expected, which is surprising. The original novel's afterword space is basically only seen by original fans, so I'm talking from the same perspective as all you original fans—but it's been getting attention for slightly steamy scenes, right? After being deeply immersed in the yuri world for so long, I thought Watanare was pretty light, so that's even more surprising.

It's all thanks to the anime staff putting so much effort in... Really, I'm grateful...

"A Yuri Story About a Girl Who Insists "It's Impossible for Two Girls to Get Together" Completely Falling Within 100 Days'" published by GA Bunko cannot be animated. That one's impossible... (※It was impossible!)

2: Goodbye Four-kun (※Spoilers)

It was me who changed Four-kun to Five-kun in the anime. PS4 nowadays (lol)

I properly made Renako bear that sin in Volume 8. It's karma, Renako.

3: Don't Trust My Tweets

By the way, I previously wrote on Twitter (now X) that "Renako can't cook and can only use a rice cooker," which even got on Wikipedia, but this time I thought "this way seems more interesting" so I changed it. Please forget about it. What's written in the main text is everything!

4: So Why Did It Become a Two-Parter? A Simple Explanation... (※Spoilers)

The Haruna arc in Volumes 6-7 became a two-parter simply because I created many scenes for Lucie-chan and Youko-chan as foreshadowing for the Satsuki arc climax. But this time, it's because I thought Chapter 3's development was necessary.

Season 2 has consistently depicted Renako's trials for choosing an abnormal path.

So I thought that without a turn where Renako (and Ajisai-san and Mai-chan) could savor their happiness again, thinking "I'm glad I chose this abnormal path!", the fear of wavering and resolve to let go would be weakened. So I added scenes that weren't originally in the plot.

Whether it's effective, please wait for the second part... I don't intend to make you wait a year!

5: Next Time, Season 2 Conclusion (※Spoilers)

Actually, Season 1 was missing only "Koto Satsuki's Story." Mai-chan, Ajisai-san, and Kaho-chan all had theirs, but "Koto Satsuki's Story" first appeared in Season 2's Volume 7. So regarding Koto Satsuki, I've intentionally limited information from the composition stage.

I'm the type of author who likes these mysterious obsessions that only I have...

Which means... well, you know. Next time, everything about what Koto Satsuki has been thinking and living for will probably be revealed. Probably...

I'll do my absolute best to successfully reach the Satsuki arc finale.

Also, regarding Kaho-chan's limited screen time this volume, I acknowledge that... it's just a little more patience needed, so the world's 500 million Kaho-chan fans and Musshu-sensei, please wait a bit longer. She probably won't appear much next time either. Sorry Kaho-chan... I'll write a short story...

Now for acknowledgments. There's! No! Space!

Takeshima Eku-sensei, thanks as always! Editor-san, thanks as always! Musshu-sensei, thanks as always! And everyone else involved, thank you always!

Dear readers, please continue supporting me! I'll do my best! This was Mikami Teren~!